

JUNK- YARD BLUES

Al Moyer

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The Junkyard Blues

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Prologue...

He felt it start from the pit of his stomach; a big ugly wave that was only bound to go up toward his mouth. His crowded stomach gave a name to that wave before his brain could register it; it was nausea and it was so strong that he knew everything inside his stomach was going to come spilling out at any moment. He parted his wet lips waiting for the mixture of horror churning inside his stomach to start the flow out, but only a thick vapor mixed with a horrible stench came out and hung before his face for almost an eternity before dissolving into the wet night air.

What've I done to myself? He asked the quiet wet night, knowing full well the answer and also that it was not going to matter. It was already done, and there was no going back. The half bottle of cheap whisky was now resting in his stomach, and not resting in peace as the waves of nausea hitting him prophesied.

What've I done to myself? Why did I do this to myself?

The question was there again, but there was no answer coming forth from the wet night. Only the drizzling rain leaking down continuously from the dark blanket of a sky above him and soaking him wet right to the bones. It was like everything in the world was against him, fighting against his every move, even the damned nature itself. *The work of God!* The only one bit of good news was that he was not feeling the cold that was there, the furnace inside his stomach was still doing a good job of heating things up.

Then why the goose bumps, padre?

He looked at his arm under the soft light cast by the street lamp above him; the goose bumps were still there and actually seemed to grow larger in size. In fact, he could swear that they looked now like tiny oranges. A new wave hit his stomach again and he opened his mouth waiting for what was going to come, but only the thick foul smelling vapor came out again, a vapor that reeked only of liquor.

God! He wanted it to happen, the waiting was killing him. He wanted to free his stomach as fast as possible before the next ordeal...A cold chill ran down his spine as the thought ran through his head. He felt the goose bumps growing in size again.

God what I'm I doing?

God didn't care! Yes, he felt deep inside like God didn't care, at least not about the next ordeal. In fact he was certain God had never cared, not about the things that had happened before or that were going to still happen. He didn't care about the little sacrifice he was going to make to put things right; that was just trivial matters to Him.

But he could handle it; he was prepared to handle it.

He looked up at the dark sky, the drizzling rain landing on his face. It was impossible to see anything up there. It was just dark and black up there. Dark and black and seemingly empty. Was there anything up there? Some huge powerful something that was actually there and controlling everything? Some huge powerful something that could see everything and could see him now? And if there was that huge powerful something up there was it looking down at him right now? Looking at his face right now? And was that almighty powerful something happy now?

He shook his head sadly; there was absolutely nothing up there, just a bunch of dark thick clouds that were mercilessly leaking down water on his face. A thick dark cloud that was just like the dark cloud that had embraced him and did not want to let go. But they will disappear; he knew that. The rain clouds and his own dark cloud, they will disappear when the light came. And the light was going to come. All that was needed was only the small sacrifice. And nothing was going to stop him from making that sacrifice, not even...

Are you sure?

He halted his thoughts for a while feeling the trembling trying to take hold of him again, but he did not need that, not right now.

I'm doing it!

He looked down at the half-empty bottle of whisky lying on the ground beside him. Just the sight of it caused another wave of nausea to rise. The new wave culminated in a stinking belch and a mouthful of saliva that he had to spit on the ground. He wanted to blame all this on the liquor, but he knew deep inside that the liquor was only part of the big picture. It was the idea of the sacrifice he was going to make, the idea of having made the decision, of having finally seen the true light and the color of that light - Not the light that was preached by the multitude who knew nothing about the true face of

God - But the real light that controlled this world. He knew that light and that face and it was not what anybody believed.

He looked up at the dark heavens again. Yes, the true face of God, the face that was not up there or anywhere else near this world. The face that was hidden very far from humanity, and had a wide smile filled with amusement on it as things went bad and bad with the matchsticks roaming around the world in the name of human beings. That was the face, and what he knew was that that face had forgotten about him or truthfully that that face had never even known of his existence. It did not care, not one bit. A tiny smile formed on his own wet lips as another wave of nausea hit him. This time the quantity of saliva that landed on the ground was double the original quantity.

“Nobody cares,” he whispered to the dark heavens, “Nobody cares, not even you; nobody.”

That was the only single truth in the world and he knew it; the only reality that made any sense. The world was for the brave and the courageous. For those people who could lift their arms and take what was theirs for taking and do so without any care. All he wanted to do was play his own part and be one of the braves. Create his own niche and start taking the right steps in his life. That was all. And the beautiful thing was that God did not care, not one bit.

Or it is God's will!

Another wave and another belch, this one stinking to high heavens. It was close, very close and all that was necessary was for him to relax and let go...

He closed his eyes, feeling the world spin out of control. The wave in his stomach was now a hurricane, rocking everything and sweeping up everything that was in its way. He felt like he was simply going to blackout and disappear in the blackness, and part of him was really trying to embrace the idea. But he knew that that part of him was the weak part. The weak stupid and cowardly part of him that was afraid to take the big step. It was that weak stupid cowardly part of him that had been afraid before and had made him believe in all the silly lies about life. And he was tired of listening to that stupid part of him.

He slowly pushed himself off the wet ground with some determination, opening his eyes as he did.

“I’m doing this,” he told himself, “I’m doing this and nothing’s going to stop me.”

It is God’s will!

He was going to make the single call, a simple call, and then everything was going to be alright.

Before he took two steps, he started vomiting...

Chapter one

The moon looks bigger through this tiny hole, he thought looking up at the full moon that occupied all his view. It was as if the moon was just hanging outside the hole, mocking him for his lack of freedom to see it from outside. All this lack of freedom because of a few hot words...Because of a case of simple straight forward and justifiable anger.

But it could've been prevented, he thought feeling the bitterness seep into his heart at having to admit that. He had been stupid, stupid and rash like a child, and now he was paying for it, and paying for it in grand style.

But it was your right, your right as a human being and the fool knew it.

Tell that to the birds, he smiled sadly looking at the huge moon that seemed to be hanging just out of his cell's tiny window.

Jude Maimo could not sleep or even start entertaining that idea. This was a new world, a different world and he was not part of it and was never going to be part of it. This was hell on earth, probably worst than hell, and he was alive and already in that hell. If there was something he knew, it was that he would never be the same again after this night. There was no way a human being could continue to be the same, to see the world with the same view after stepping past the threshold of the cell.

And all this because of his stupidity, because of his big mouth. A new wave of anger started rising again, anger that he could not know who to direct to. He could say it was the old fool's fault, or that it was the fault of the poverty he knew so well, or the imperfection of the world, but at the end of the day he should've kept his mouth shut. That was what the world he was living in demanded; just for the lowlifes like him to keep their mouths shut and forget the silly word called justice.

Just stop thinking and try to sleep. You're here now and there's nothing you can do about it but try to catch some sleep and see if you can feel at home.

That was like wishing to be outside under that moon. There was no way that could happen, and even if he was fainting there was no way he could do it on the floor he was standing on. The floor that was covered with rough and sharp pebbles sticking out of it like some merciless sharp stakes. It was a job that only a real sadist could have done, a sadist whose sole purpose on

earth was to make people suffer. The pebbles looked like they could tear open his skin just as easily as a blade, and there was no way on earth he was going to lie on some blades sticking out of the earth and waiting for his skin. But the pebbles were not the only problem...

There was also the issue of the thick awful stench that was hanging heavily around the cell, hanging very close to the floor of the cell. The thick awful stench that was slowly rising in thick heavy waves from the heap of feces at one corner of the cell. The heap of feces that was already a day old, and that was going to increase in size and shape before the coming of a new day. That horrible aroma coming out of the heap of feces was too heavy to even rise a few centimeters above the floor. It was dense enough to completely choke and suffocate a human being. But that was not even all the reason why he couldn't try to sleep, not the stench, not the blade-like pebbles. No, he was certain he could manage the too horrors, but what he was not going to manage and did not even want to start making assumptions about was the issue of the three men coiled on the floor and appearing to sleep so peacefully.

As if they're in a five star hotel room with a king size bed, he shook his head in wonder and awe, turning away from the tiny hole of a window to look at them. How can they do this? He asked himself looking at the three men on the floor. How can they be sleeping so peacefully here? With the stench and the rough floor? It was a marvel to see them, an issue he would've loved to think of in some light of respect if that other part of his mind could allow him. That part of his mind that said it was all just a façade, just a way to fool him to lower his guard so they could get him.

He saw one of the men on the floor moan and sigh then sat up as if he had heard his thoughts and wanted to prove he was not all wrong. The man started scratching his bare skeleton-like chest like a chimpanzee picking out some fleas from its hide. The man was the man who had handled him earlier that evening, forcing him to call him "Chef." The man smiled up at Jude when he saw Jude looking at him, and Jude felt his knees hurt again where they had landed on the floor earlier that evening.

"What're you doing standing there?" the man asked still scratching his chest, "Are you on some guard duty?"

You can't sleep too, can you? Jude wanted to laugh. You were just pretending just like the others, just trying to fool me into forgetting what you can do, what you're planning to do.

"Hey, I'm talking to you, Schoolboy," the man said.

"I can't sleep," Jude murmured.

"Why?"

"I can't sleep on this floor."

The man cracked and laughed heartily not able to hide the amusement in the air. "He can't sleep on the floor," the man laughed again, scratched his chest some more and smiled up at Jude, "Don't worry I'll look for a nice comfortable mattress for you tomorrow, don't just worry." The man stood and said again, "He can't sleep on the floor," then cracked up again. The man was still laughing as he urinated on the heap of feces, the force of the urine sending the sick aroma a couple more centimeters above the floor. "Don't worry, Schoolboy, you'll be able to sleep tomorrow, I swear to God you'll be able to sleep tomorrow. All you need's a mattress," the man said turning away from the heap of feces. The man yawned noisily and smiled at Jude and noticed Jude looking at the heap of feces, "Don't worry about it, you'll clean this place tomorrow till it shines."

What! Jude wanted to scream. It was not possible, they could not do that to him, they could not make him clean all that. It was impossible, and even if someone had a gun at his head and asked him to do it he would say no. But somewhere deep inside he could see them making him, see himself cleaning it and even smiling as they laughed. God where am I?

"Be a good guard and kill any mosquitoes trying to bite me, you hear?" the man said and joined his friends on the floor. Before Jude could even think two straight thoughts the man was fast asleep again - or pretended to be.

Jude felt the anger come again. He hated the three men on the floor with all his might, hated them for the nonchalance that surrounded all their actions, hated them for what they could do to him. You're in their world, a voice said to him inside, and they're not even originally from this world. They are just victims too, just victims who've learnt to adapt without much fighting. It was his own fault, he was not strong enough to survive in this world and they knew it. They were toying with him because he was not

strong enough. But was it only toying with him that they were doing? Was it not possible that they could do what they had been telling him they were going to do to him? He felt his stomach tighten inside.

I don't belong here!

"You'll get used to it in no time," one of them had said to him early that evening.

It was insane, even if he knew it was possible, even if his intellectual mind believed in the possibility. But only a totally insane human being wants to get used to something like this, sleeping on the rough pebbles and choking on that stench and not knowing when some sick fellow sleeping beside you would decide to take a particular interest in the size of your anus. It was absurd, completely absurd.

I want to get out of here, he told himself turning back to peep at the full moon, I want to be out there and I can give anything to do that. *Even calling Derrick?* Yes, even calling Derrick. If only he could make that call, that simple but difficult call, he would be free...

"I just want to make a call," he had pleaded with the police officer who had processed him, "Just one call please."

"Everybody wants to make a call," the police officer had replied already pushing him towards the cellblock.

"You don't understand!"

"Do you think so?" the police officer laughed.

"What I mean's I want to call my brother," Jude explained even though he could see the only effect his explanation was making was none, "He can come and solve this," he said hating the sound of it, "Please!"

"You want to call your brother?"

"Yes."

"That's sweet," the police officer said and smiled, "I want to call my brother too," he laughed and pushed Jude along, "Let me tell you something, young man, once you're here you're here and what that means is that you'll have to spend some time here. So, you can only call your brother or your mother or whoever you want to call when the time comes, and the time comes when I decide."

Jude could see there was nothing he could do to persuade the man. It was set and set on solid concrete and there was nothing he could do about it.

And was calling Derrick actually the right thing to do? There was still Niba (yes, but he did not have Niba's number offhand, he had Derrick's number instead). God, what did I put myself in? He could see Derrick smiling and telling his wife in that over patronizing voice of his, "He thought he was already a man. When you tell a child that life's not easy he thinks you're just joking with him..."

"When?" Jude asked the police officer.

"What!? Are you asking me a question?"

"I just wanted to..."

"Move!"

When the officer pushed him into the cell, smiling as the three members of the cell hooted their welcome, he said, "You'll call your brother," he looked at his watch, "Monday morning." And then he was gone.

It was Saturday; early Saturday evening.

Chapter Two

Then the harassment had started!

Well, it did not just start immediately. He was a new breed, a new specimen being introduced into a new world, a world that was already occupied by the true occupants. He was a new animal being introduced into a cage that already had other animals and these ones a step toward wild. And like good animals there had to be that period of taking a step back to study the new breed, to sniff the new breed out and see what it was made of.

But the period of sniffing around could never last forever, for after the observation was always the prodding...

"So, what do we've here?" one of the three men looking at him asked smoking his cigarette and sitting on the rough floor, a look of strange eternal joy on his face.

The three men looked like they were brothers, not that they looked alike or anything close to that, but something about them gave that air of looking like people who belonged together, people who had always belonged together. They were all thin, almost skeletal, with faces that were completely amused and enjoying everything that was happening around them.

"Why are you here, Schoolboy?" another one asked smiling up at him, "Can I call you Schoolboy?"

Jude glared at the man.

"You don't look too happy being here, are you?" the man said and the others laughed, "So, why are you here? Eh, Schoolboy?"

None of your business! Jude wanted to shout that at the man's face, but he could only glare at the man wanting him to see the glare and keep his distance.

The man smiled jovially up at him actually seeming to enjoy what he was seeing on Jude's face, "Can you even talk? I think he can't talk. We've us a lady who can't even talk," that cracked them up as if it was the funniest thing on earth.

"Don't worry he'll sing like a bird when the time comes," the one with the cigarette said.

Jude looked at the faces smiling up at him, faces that looked like they had not visited a barber in ages, and hated all of them. Couldn't they see that he was not in the mood for any silly talking? That he wanted nothing to do with them, with the horror coming out from every angle of the cell? That he did not belong here? What was wrong with them? What was so amusing in here, in this hell?

"Why are you here?" the man asked again, as gentle as before.

"I don't know," Jude snapped finally, *and it's none of your business, just let me be.*

"He's an angry lady, Chef" one of the others said and winked at Jude.

"Don't call me..." Jude started turning to glare at the man.

"He can bite," the one with the cigarette said and laughed, "I love them when they can bite."

"This one's mine, Chef," the other man said.

"No way, she's mine."

What're they talking about? Jude asked himself starting to feel a cold in the pit of his stomach as tiny bits of ideas started to float into his head. He had heard stories about cells, stories that were...

"I'll decide who'll have her," the one they were calling Chef said, he looked like he was the leader. The Chef thought for a while and said, "You had the last one Fred, this one's yours Nteh."

"No way, he'll kill him" the one with the cigarette said, "You don't know what's between his legs."

"It's not that big," the man called Nteh said with a wink at Jude, "You can see for yourself, he's just trying to frighten you. What I have here is just a small black snake that cannot do any harm." He stood up and before Jude could understand what he was doing, the man's boxer shorts were hanging below his knees. "See, it's nothing to be afraid of," the man said grabbing his manhood in his hand and showing it to Jude.

Jude felt his heart miss a beat. Was this a joke? A sick joke they were playing on him? He wanted to scream, wanted to scream for help, but something told him that it would just be a waste of his time and energy. *They cannot do that to me, he told himself. I cannot let them do that to me. I'll fight and die before allowing them to do that to me.* He felt his mouth go completely dry.

“We’re going to have a very interesting night,” the man was still saying now pulling up his boxers, “You and me and I swear you’re going to love it.” The others were on the floor laughing their lungs out.

What if this is not a joke? What if they mean all this? *I will die first*. God, where were the police officers? Would they allow something like that to happen in here? He wanted to believe that they could not allow that, but deep inside he knew they could.

“It’s not that big,” the man said and winked at Jude again.

Of all the sexual fantasies he had ever had (and God knows they had been many), he had never seen himself been raped by another man. No, that was something that had never even come close to his mind. A cold chill ran down his spine as he stood there looking at the three laughing men on the floor unable to say a word...

That night, he will spend the night standing by the tiny hole that acted as a window for the cell, waiting for them to attempt anything, anticipating any advance at anytime any of them would wake up from sleep and go to urinate on the heap of feces. Watching them as they slept and telling himself not to believe that they were actually sleeping.

The only thing that he will see that night closer to sex will be the man they called Fred pull down his pants, wet his palms and masturbate as if he was in some private room alone. Moaning in complete ecstasy and winking at him afterward, before going back to sleep on the floor...

“So, what did you do?” the one they called Chef asked again, this time on his feet and taking a step towards Jude.

“I don’t know,” he said again.

“You don’t know why you’re here, Schoolboy? Is that what you want me to believe?”

“Look, I didn’t do anything and I don’t want...”

“He didn’t do anything, did you hear that?”

That cracked them up again.

“Do I look stupid,” the Chef said after the laughter had died down.

“Look I don’t want...”

He did not finish the statement, as suddenly an iron hand gripped his shoulder, iron-like fingers digging into his shoulder, digging and seeming to pierce through the skin. The pain that shot through his body was unbearable.

Jude cried out, trying to wiggle away, but the grip was like a vise and there was no way he could run away from it. The man pushed him down like a weightless piece of paper and he landed on both his bare knees the sharp pebbles on the floor tearing off a share of his skin on each knee. Jude screamed feeling a new pain that was more than the fingers digging into the skin of his shoulder. He felt himself almost blacking out, his head spinning as the pain raced through every nerve in his body. He could feel wetness down on his knees, and without looking he knew exactly what color that would be.

“Now, we can talk, Schoolboy,” the man said slowly from behind, “Why are you here?”

“Please...” Jude cried.

“You don’t know?”

The fingers dug deeper, forcing his knees harder on the rough floor.

“You don’t know?”

“No, no...”

“No who?”

The fingers...

“I...”

“No who?”

The pain was confusing him now. He could hear the words the man was saying, but he could not make much sense of it.

“We can do this the whole year, Schoolboy,” the man said as gentle as before.

“Say Chef,” one of the others shouted.

“Chef,” Jude tried, sounding like a robot.

“I didn’t hear you.”

The fingers again...

“No, Chef,” Jude shouted.

“Good; now tell me why you’re here.”

“My landlord...”

“What did he do?”

“I had a problem with him.

“What type of problem?”

“I...”

The fingers...

“Did you sleep with his wife?”

“No, no...”

“His daughter?”

“No...”

“Then why are you here?”

“Rents...”

“What?”

“I owe him some months...”

He owed his landlord some rents, precisely for five months. And that unpaid rents amounted to twenty thousand francs CFA, which was not a small sum by any means. Well, if it had been a small sum he would've been able to pay. If the four thousand francs per month was a small sum that he could've easily deducted out of his fifteen thousand francs monthly salary without ending up begging before the middle of the month, the money would never have amounted to twenty thousand francs in the first place.

But was he here because he could not pay his rents in time? That was not true; he was here because of his mouth, because he had not known his place in the system of things.

The man could've let him go, he was sure of that. The man could've let him go without bothering to collect his money (And where would he have gone to? That was the big question. Out in the street? Back with Derrick and his family?). But he had wanted to make the man see the injustice he was trying to enact, telling the man that he needed a three months notice to be able to get out of the room (and not knowing that the man had already found another tenant who was even willing to pay for the room at 6000frs a month, a tenant who was willing to pay for the room a couple of months in advance). They had exchanged some words, him and the landlord and in the course of it the anger had taken over him and he had called the landlord a stupid bastard, a pig, a brainless nincompoop.

“I'll show you what a nincompoop can do,” the landlord had said to him.

And here he was in a police cell, learning firsthand what a brainless nincompoop was capable of. Jude shook his head and yawned, his eyes feeling as if they were filled with huge grains of sand.

You need some sleep, you can't stand there forever and you know it. He looked at the sleeping men on the floor. *They were just joking around, just trying to frighten you.*

That could be true, but I'm not completely sure, and unless I'm sure there's no way I can let down my guard.

But the men on the floor were sleeping so peacefully, and did not even seem to notice he was in the cell with them.

Just joking around with you...

No, no way!

Jude looked at the full moon some time later and wondered what time it was. That was the worst thing about finding yourself in the hell called a cell, the issue of time. There was no time; no way you could know the time. It always felt like you were lying in a timeless world, like time was frozen on the spot by some invisible wicked hand. Like living in a planet that was some light years away from earth, a planet that was like a vacuum, where everything was frozen in place.

When's tomorrow going to come? He asked the moon. When's Monday going to come?

The moon did not answer back; it just continued to mock his lack of freedom, hanging there outside his tiny cell window.

Chapter Three

Derrick owns a car. It is an old model Toyota Carina 2, the type that every Toyota manufacturer has already forgotten about. The car needs a lot more parts and a lot more paint to look anything as the manufacturer intended, and it has a funny tendency of leaving the house with Derrick sitting behind the wheel and coming back with a dirty looking mechanic sitting behind the wheel.

It was in this car, Jude's bail already settled, that Derrick started talking. His voice sounded as patronizing as always to Jude.

"You should've told me you were having problems paying your rents," Derrick said as he pulled out of the parking lot of the police station, glancing briefly around before turning into the road. Jude sat beside him and did not try to look at his face. He already knew what he would see on Derrick's face, a look of triumph, that look that said, "I told you."

"You should've let me know," Derrick said again, "You should've at least called me earlier."

You little shit! You thought you were already grownup, that you were already big enough to call your own shots. Ha ha ha! Now how do you see yourself? Where are you now? Who did you call to bail you out?

The beauty of life is always how things look when they're already over, how problems look so solvable when they're already over; when the deed is already done. It was like calling the fire brigade when the house was already down to smoldering pieces of charred brick.

"You should've let me know..."

"It wasn't a problem really," Jude murmured almost to himself. He hated the way he felt sitting beside Derrick at this moment. He hated the way he felt like a child, a child standing before his father filled with shame after another session of wetting the bed. To think of it, it was almost always how he felt when he was with Derrick, always like some tiny powerless piece of shit. And there was something he was sure of, that Derrick enjoyed seeing him that way, that Derrick enjoyed hovering over him like some father-figure (Derrick was not his father, but the truth be told, Derrick had been able to play the role of a father better than their father could). A father-figure that

was always right, whose every word was supposed to be taken without any hesitation. The word of a god.

“What did you say?” Derrick asked glancing at him. This time Jude caught the look in his eyes. It was filled with amusement; amusement that was bordered by a lot of irritation, “Hmm? What did you say?”

“Nothing,” Jude murmured again.

“Nothing?”

Jude said nothing; he kept his eyes on the taxi before them, whose brake lights were now coming on as the early morning traffic was slowing to a halt.

“You think it was not really a problem, huh?”

The traffic was now at a complete standstill. It was always slow driving in the morning in Bamenda when everybody was heading somewhere to start their day. This morning it was going to be slower, Jude could feel it.

Derrick looked at him, some anger replacing the amusement behind his eyes for a brief moment before disappearing again, “It wasn’t a problem really and yet you spend two days in a police cell. Can you explain that to me? Can you carefully tell me what you were doing in a police cell then if there was no problem really?” Derrick shook his head, “I don’t know at times...” he smiled a puzzling smile, “Do you even know how much it cost me to get you out of there? The amount of disgrace to know that my own brother was now spending nights in a police cell?”

How was him spending two days in a police cell a disgrace for Derrick? Was Derrick the one who had spend the nights afraid to sleep, afraid that some sick bastard was going to come for you with hideous sexual intentions? Was Derrick the one with scraped and painful knees right now?

“I don’t know what you want,” Derrick shook his head again, “I just don’t know.”

Yes and you told me so.

Derrick let the car to roll again, the traffic was moving again.

“I’m even supposed to be in school right now, and here I am, sitting here with you,” Derrick said, “And you say it was not a problem.”

Jude sometimes thought of Derrick as a judge holding a huge scale, a scale that was only meant to weigh him. And the truth was that that scale always found him wanting, wanting and worthless.

They were brothers; that was the truth. But they had their own differences, both physically and psychologically. Derrick was taller, broader and more impressive looking, someone who could always be noticed. And he always had that air of authority around him, with that patronizing air swelling his head. Jude was an average sort of person, more than seven years younger than Derrick, a little smaller (not because he could not be broader but because he did not yet have the ingredients to gain growth in size). In the way they saw the world, it was clear to Jude that Derrick saw the world in only one color, a color that nobody could change again, a color that was always perfect. Jude saw the world in all the colors that were there, colors that were bound to intermix.

So, even if he had explained to Derrick that it had only been a matter of misunderstanding between him and the landlord that had landed him in jail, Derrick would only see the color that he could see, "Owing somebody five months of rents doesn't sound to me like a little misunderstanding."

Or if he had tried to make Derrick see that his salary was too small to take care of his feeding even before taking care of his rents, Derrick would've simply said, "You made the choice not me; I didn't ask you to leave the house. You left because you thought you were already grownup."

There were issues about life that Derrick could not grasp even if they were licking his face. Derrick could not see the fact that he Jude was truly an adult now. Twenty-seven years of age was bound to give him that right to think of himself as an adult, a grownup who needed to start thinking for himself.

There were other issues...

The dragon lady!

He did not want to be involved with her again; the few weeks back when she had first come as Derrick's wife had been enough to drive him insane.

"How did you think you were going to pay your landlord all that money?" Derrick asked easing the car slowly behind the taxi that was ahead of them. The traffic was still not completely letting up.

Jude shrugged, "I was going to pay him," he said.

“How were you going to do that?” Derrick laughed.

I know I'm a failure.

It was plain on Derrick's face and from the sound of the laugh. And the sad thing was that hard as it was to admit, he was seeing himself in the same light. He was a failure, a failure who could not afford a tiny sum like twenty thousand francs, a failure who claimed to be old enough to live alone who could not even eat a proper meal, a failure who had to call Derrick to come and bail him out when he was in deep shit. A dumb failure who was stupid enough to even try to sound brave by saying that he had been planning to pay the money. The big question was how on earth that could've been possible.

They drove for a while in silence, and then Derrick said, “Everybody was worried.”

Who's everybody? Jude thought.

“Father and mother, I called them,” Derrick was saying.

Jude felt the usual anger coming up.

“You've to be careful and stop getting everybody worried.”

I bet he was really worried, Jude thought, the bastard, I bet he was really worried.

“Do you even have any idea what could've happened to you in there? Anything.”

Better than you do, Jude wanted to tell him but he kept quiet. He had been the one in that cell, the one who still had his eyes feeling like they were packed full of sand because of lack of sleep. The one who might have been raped by three men, raped in that stench filled tiny room, raped on that rough floor with blade-like pebbles sticking out of it. And everyone was worried, everyone including the bastard.

Jude closed his eyes feeling the anger go up a couple of degrees.

His father was worried, that was a joke. All the things on earth could've have happened to him in that cell and the man would not have cared one tiny bit. Even if he died, the bastard would just shed the usual crocodile tears then go out and look for one of his mistresses and celebrate the passing away of his last child with her on her bed. He was just a burden to the man, had always been a burden to the man. Well, to face facts he was not even the man's burden; the man had put down that burden long ago, abandoning him

at the mercy of Derrick and the world. So, probably there would not have been any crocodile tears shedding.

“Where did you keep your things?” Derrick asked after a while, bringing him back to the world.

Chapter Four

So naturally and without any preamble, the decision was made.

“Where did you keep your things?” Derrick asked again.

The decision was made and he was not given the chance to debate it. The decision was made and there was nothing he could do about it. He was going back under Derrick’s wings again, and going back while his head was bowed to the ground in shame.

“Where...?”

Jude shrugged, “I don’t know,” he said.

“What do you mean by you don’t know?”

“They’re probably still in the room.”

What things? That was the big question. What was actually left in the bloody room? The bloody room he had defended so much, defended and ended up spending two solid days in jail. What was Derrick going to do when he discovered the nature of things as they stood? What was Derrick going to say when he saw the empty room? When he saw that all that was left was a few clothes (Or a bunch of faded rags that passed for clothes), a few clothes and an inch thick dirty looking mattress on the floor?

It was going to be yet another sign of his failure, another bit of disgrace in Derrick’s eyes. Another reason for Derrick to foam in the mouth and go all patronizing with him again.

What’s this? Where’s everything?

Yes, that was going to be a good question. A good question that was going to be very hard to answer. For how could he respond to that? How could he open up and explain things to Derrick to the point of comprehension when he knew there was no such point when it came to Derrick’s world? To tell Derrick that he had sold everything to meet up with things. The bed, the kerosene stove (all the things Derrick had paid for when he was going to the university), and a few clothes. That he had sold all these things just to pay some of his debts, just to have something to eat when things were becoming too difficult for his meager salary to manage. How could he explain all that to a straight arrow of a man who had never found himself in such a condition before? To make such a man see that things were

not always the way you believed them to be? That life could be totally out of reasonable order at times. He did not know how that was going to happen.

The beautiful sad thing was that Derrick was going to feign understanding. Nod as he talked, his eyes beaming with that irritating amusement. Even tell him that it was alright, that he understood, but at the same time his eyes beaming with that mocking amusement that was very irritating, the questions all written in them: *You wanted to be independent didn't you? You wanted to prove to me that you were already man enough to face the world alone didn't you? How do you like it now?* And normally he was going to play the part of the wayward child, try to look as sorry as possible.

God, life was a wicked thing!

If there was something Derrick lacked, it was the ability to understand that simple fact, and to understand other people and how they ticked. And when it was his own brother, Derrick lacked that in abundance. At times it felt like Derrick was from another planet.

There was no way Derrick could understand that simple pattern of growth that came along with aging; that simple fact that when somebody was a child today, that person was bound to be an adult tomorrow. He could not understand the fact that that person will suffer from a simple longing for independence that came along with growth. That simple wish to finally call the shots without having to ask for permission. And when an attempt by such a person to gain that longed for independence was suffering some setbacks it was completely predictable how he was going to take it. That there was a time when he had to take a step back and stop acting like a mother-hen trying to cramp a year old chick under her wings, was an impossible concept for Derrick to grasp.

And worst Derrick could not understand the fact that his home was no longer habitable for another adult now that he was married and already building a family. Now that he had *the dragon lady* to run things, (a woman whom Jude considered to be a dimwitted and completely irrational psychopath). Derrick could not understand that there was also that sense of guilt, that sense of guilt that came every time that adult would look at himself in the mirror and see a man, a grownup man who was completely dependent on his brother, who had been dependent on his brother for far too long. An adult who had a vision of giving Derrick some breathing space. All that adult

was going to be was another burden around the house, and a house where the everyday monotonous drama of marriage was obviously going to be manifesting in full swing. *And that was something that scared Jude, the fact that he would've to be in the house again, listening to all the hot words flying around; listening to all the senseless battles that sometimes almost evolved into fist fights.*

Derrick could never see all these things, they were beyond his grasp, and so he had made the decision with all the brain cells he could afford.

“Which direction?” Derrick asked when they reached Foncha street junction.

Jude pointed, “Up that way.”

He was going back, going back like a prodigal son and there was nothing he could do about it. His hands were tied so tight and there was no way he could free himself, tied and he was being led. It felt like a cow being let to the slab for slaughter. It was a new prison he was going to, a new cell and there was no turning back.

For how long?

He looked at his hands as Derrick made a turn around the Foncha street junction.

How long's this going to last? He wanted to know.

Chapter Five

Hell is a place of untold and unending torture. A place of suffering beyond the grasp of the human mind. A place where the soul languishes in eternity, begging for death to come and erase it from existence. It is managed by a big fiery devil who goes by the name of Lucifer, who is assisted by a couple of demons, red demons with tails and tiny horns. They hover over the soul languishing in the burning sulfur, constantly attending to the soul to make sure it is well immersed into the burning sulfur. It is a wicked place, a place that no sane man would ever want to think about or see firsthand. So, the preacher says...

But the stupid preacher was all wrong, completely wrong. Even if his oily mouth was capable of spitting every word out as if it was the gospel truth. That silly preacher was wrong because he had never been there, had never even stood at the threshold of hell. Jude knew all that. The only word of truth in the preachers liturgy was the word; torture.

Jude knew all that because with every justification, he thought he was in hell. And that hell was not some lake of burning sulfur and there was no Lucifer around foaming in the mouth or his eager red demons. No, his hell was his new room in the home of his brother, and what passed for burning sulfur was that constant vibration inside his head, that constant vibration of a child's hopeless crying that seemed to be emanating from deep inside his head.

And the best part of it all was that no one seemed to notice what he was going through or what the poor child was going through droning ceaselessly like that. It was the usual family drama, things that were already set on stone and could not be changed. Poor things that were turned into victims for reasons that were only classified as absurd.

Jesus! This is why I've never wanted to come back, why I wanted to be on my own so that I can't hear or see all this.

He had tried to play it down, tried to believe it was something that was only temporal, that he was only making it a big deal because he had not wanted to be here. But now it looked like it was something that was going to be permanent, something that was actually a big deal (*who can listen to the poor*

child night after night without drawing that conclusion?). And the crying child was just going to be as normal as a framed picture on the wall, a picture that only he seemed to notice was all wrong. A piece of normal music that only he seemed to notice sounded all wrong.

I don't belong here.

But you're here, padre and there's nothing you can do about it.

For now!

Hey, don't worry you'll get used to this in no time.

Impossible!

You think so? Which one's better the cell or this place?

He wanted to tell himself that it was this place, but that tiny voice vibrating in his head told him he was wrong. There were nights he actually wished he was back in the cell (well without the three odd characters). During most of those nights, he had hated the child, really hated the child. But when he thought about it some more, the child was just a poor victim. *Just like me.*

How can they ignore all that screaming?

They're used to it.

But who could get used to this? Who could seal off his or her ears to that constant throbbing scream coming out of a child's tiny throat? A scream that was constant throughout the night, night after night.

And when all it wants is simple.

It was absurd he concluded.

Jude covered his ears with a pillow and screamed silently in his mind, "Jesus, can't you just shut him up, just make him stop?" But it was a waste of time praying for that to happen. Jesus was not going to come down from heaven and make the poor little thing to stop screaming for what was rightly and justifiably supposed to belong to it at this moment of its life. The child was fully engaged and nothing was going to block that pitiful screaming from getting inside Jude's head, not even the pillow wrapped over his head. It was his curse for coming back; *the dragon lady's* gift to him for coming back into her world. She surely knew somewhere deep in her psychopathic mind that the child was freaking him out with its screaming. He could actually see a tiny smile of joy forming on her already scowl deformed face.

God!

The baby was trying to increase the pitch, its voice already a tiny powerless droning that could no longer go up an appreciable notch after a whole night of constantly screaming. The tiny powerless droning was still powerful enough to make the house vibrate though.

And she doesn't care. Why didn't she just strangle the poor little thing and save the poor thing from all this torture? Yes, that would be the merciful thing to do, just grab the child's neck and squeeze and squeeze till there was no life left in its body. Squeeze it and drop it into a toilet and forget about it.

The child stopped for a while as if it had somehow heard his thoughts. Stopped for a while as if to listen some more; then started again, the sound coming back full blast inside his head.

"God!" Jude gritted his teeth, "Just make him stop, just give it what it wants."

And what did the child need that was so difficult to be given to it? It was pretty simple; all that the child needed was breast milk! Simple straight forward and natural breast milk that was actually suppose to be in abundance. Something that was rightfully supposed to belong to the baby. Breast milk that the child was supposed to suck till its belly was as heavy as that of a grasshopper. Suck and even spit some out just for good measure.

But that was not possible. And why was that not possible? *Because the world is filled with people who should've been living in mental ward. Because such a person happens to be a woman living under this roof. And because this one in particular was completely beyond any hope of redemption, only living by her code of psychopathic obsession.*

It is always said that every human being has a weakness. Derrick's was not an exception even if he tried to look like one. His weakness was *the dragon lady* (one of his students as the stories go whom he had had a little out of luck affair with, ending up with a pregnant unstable woman who could bring the house down just with one word). And it was totally funny to see Derrick living under her yoke. Derrick was married to a woman who was probably the closest thing to a maniac Jude had ever seen, a woman who was willing to protect her breasts from going flat by starving her own seven months old child. Protecting her unremarkable breasts that were never going to look anything better than what they already were. And all that with the idea of trying to prevent her husband from looking at any other breasts out there (as if that was the only thing they looked at).

It was horrible and insane.

But what about Derrick? How was it that he too was deaf to all that screaming from the poor child, lying in the same room, same bed with the poor child? Jude wondered from time to time. It was an inquiry that had no answer. It was totally...Jude shook his head.

Here he has no voice, he's totally mellowed out in here.

It was funny, funny in a sad way to see Derrick cowering in his own corner as *the dragon lady*, ruled the place. It was funny to see that Derrick too was just another coward, another failure, another weakling who could be made to tap dance at anytime, always stepping into the house everyday filled with dread and anticipation...

"You were looking at her!" the accusations were always in the air, flying from one section of the house to the other and almost always the same.

"I was looking at nobody," his voice all mellowed as if he was a child expecting to be slapped at any moment.

"You think I'm a fool, I saw you looking at her, that tiny ugly thing of a girl."

"I wasn't looking at her or anybody."

"Continue taking me for a fool, I know everything you do. Do you think I don't know you? I know you very well."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You do, you womanizer. One day I'll show you something you've never seen before."

"I wasn't looking at anybody. Now I don't have to look at any person again?"

"She was not any person, you were looking at her."

It was completely insane. It was something that Jude would have loved never to witness in his life. God knew he had witnessed a lot of such scenes while growing up, with a father who thought the only thing that made a man a man was keeping a long chain of mistresses who would drain every coin from his coffers and leave him completely penniless.

I don't want to be here and God knows it.

He turned around in bed and closed his eyes, the pillow still over his ears.

Marriage!

That was the saddest tragedy of this world. It was always funny to see the number of people eager to get into it and the number trying to get out of it. The number of people marriage could break in less time than you could believe. It was a tragedy he always thought he was never going to be a part of. And living in Derrick's house was something that made him see why it was all a mistake to get himself into such a tragic trap.

"I'm never going to end up like that," he whispered to himself still lying in bed, the pillow still over his ears, "Not for any reason in this world."

He actually believed his resolve.

Chapter Six

“Did you check that information?” Derrick asked him early one morning.

It was going to be another “your future” talk, Jude could see that. It was not something new and if there was something that he knew it was that nothing worthwhile ever came out from them. Today it was going to be about the recruitment exercise launched by the government to recruit young university graduates. The usual political stuff that always come out during an election year.

Jude nodded.

“And you’ve what they need?”

He nodded again.

“Good.”

Derrick was busily knotting his tie over a shirt that looked expensive enough and completely at place on his impressive looking structure.

She’s going to throw another fit seeing you dressed like that.

Jude turned to look at Derrick’s wife, *the dragon lady*; she was in her corner of the living room, in front of the television, her eyes glued to the screen, the usual scowl painted over her face. She was trying to feed the poor child with a mixture of some baby food that Jude could not guess the content. It was a sad sight to see, a sad and somehow comical sight to see; her eyes glued to the television screen her hand mechanically trying to shove spoonful after spoonful of food into the child’s already full mouth, and the child making a failed effort to avoid the food. The baby was trying with one of its free hands to protest, the tiny baby hand waving to and fro in front of its face, and naturally receiving a constant reflex controlled slap at every moment it was caught in her peripheral vision.

Why don’t you just kill the poor thing? Jude thought again feeling the constant repulsion. It was easy and economical for her to just grab the child’s tiny neck and wring it around and save herself the trouble of having to care for it, so she could just concentrate on her husband and hold him tight enough close to her.

It's none of your business really, you're under somebody's roof and whatever they do is their business. Just keep your cool and try to get back on your feet.

But he could not stop seeing the scene; he could not turn away from it.

The child spat some of the unwanted food on her and she looked finally away from the television, looked down at it with a look of anger and irritation. For a moment Jude felt she was going to throw the baby on the floor or knock it on the head with the spoon she was holding in her hand, or simply slap its face and crush it like pulp.

How do you survive this?

“What’s wrong with you? Are you listening to me?”

“Hmm?” Jude turned back slowly to face Derrick.

Did Derrick even notice all these things or was it that he was already so under her boots that he did no longer care?

“When’ll you ever take anything serious in your life?” Derrick asked; he looked a little irritated. He had been saying something to him while he was staring at the struggling child. “You keep acting as if you already have something precious somewhere, as if you know something that others don’t.”

You know the only thing I really want, and even if I want this it’s farfetched, Jude thought.

“You need to start living in this world and not in some make believe world in your head,” Derrick said, “How much will compiling the documents and everything going to cost?”

“About ten thousand,” Jude said.

Derrick nodded, picked up his briefcase and was almost out of the house when he stopped and said, “This is a chance you can’t miss.” Then he was gone, having delivered the verdict.

Chapter Seven

There had been a lot of talks about his future, ever since he left the university over four years ago. What all the “your future” talks were characteristic of was that they were always engineered by Derrick. And they were all centered around the short-cut approach, the easiest and-fastest-means possible approach (an approach that history had proven time and again to be not so short). Derrick had a precise idea what he wanted him to become; another government worker, another complainer waiting for the end of the month on tip toes. Derrick could only see that future for him in his straight arrowed vision.

“You already have a degree, all you need now is to get a job, a government job,” Derrick would tell him time and time again, “Forget all the stupidity you’ve in your head.”

Just because he could not bear to see things the way I see them. If he does that then he’s no longer the all knowing, all controlling Derrick.

He had his own plan for the future, had had that plan for years now. It was a simple, straight forward and economical plan (if somebody really cared to look at the real figures that were involved in finding yourself with a government job these days, or getting into a professional school with the hopes of having a job waiting for you after). The only problem was that Derrick had never seen the simplicity and practicality of the plan. To Derrick it was the effects of having a head up in the clouds, of dreaming about castles in the air while there were normal looking houses solidly planted on land. But going in for a post graduate degree was not any castles in the air. It was something that was practical, something that was worth the efforts, Jude knew it and that was what he wanted for his future, just a chance to go back to school and get himself a postgraduate degree. There were no loopholes involved in that; he did not have to oil somebody’s mouth and fill his pockets with cash and he did not need a godfather to do that. Just plain financial support and sacrifice (which was lacking seriously from the picture considering that Derrick could not see the value of it, and the fact that Derrick’s hands were now completely full with raising his own family). And he was very certain getting a job afterward was not going to be a big

problem. Higher education establishments were popping up everyday around the country and they needed lecturers, so he was quite certain getting a job afterward was going to be a piece of cake. He could not foresee how any sensible person with a postgraduate degree in his pockets at the moment could lack something significant to do.

Well, the ease at getting a job aside, that was his dream, his true ambitions, to get a postgraduate degree. All he ever wanted to do was go as far as it was humanly possible in his studies (and he had the brains for it, that he was certain). And that was enough.

It was that simple vision that Derrick lacked, that simple ambition that Derrick thought was equivalent to building castles in the clouds. To Derrick what he needed was a job, whatever job that he could get, even if there was never going to be any satisfaction involved.

“You can’t start choosing what you want in this country,” Derrick would say, “Thousands of people would die to get the chance you’re having.”

And what that chance involved was one attempt after another to land a government job or to get into a professional school (Derrick’s grand alternative to going back to school to get a straight forward postgraduate degree). It had started immediately after he had graduated from the University of Buea with a BSc in Chemistry. He had written one recruitment examination into the public service after another (which were actually too few), one entrance examination after another to get into a professional school. *And all that to no avail.* Not that he had failed all of them. Actually he had passed most of them, but the issue was always the oral session of the examinations, the oral session that was always taking place after the results were out. The orals that had no purpose but for the officials to have their mouths oiled and their pockets filled with cash. He could remember one such orals; when he had been asked to balance a pretty cheap chemical equation, an equation that any high school chemistry student could’ve handled without even thinking twice. And he had done just that, actually smiling to himself, and the jury had actually congratulated him. But later when the results of the orals were out he was not among the selected. That was when he had realized that it was a hopeless course, that recruitment examinations for government jobs and entrance examinations into professional schools was something that was destined for a selected few, a

selected few who could afford the mouth oiling and the pocket filling, or another higher breed who had uncles and aunts or godfathers up somewhere in the chain of command somewhere in the system. As it was the same case with getting a job in one of the real big private establishments. That was the true castles in the clouds, the true castles that could not even be glimpsed by just anybody. And he was one of the anybodies; that breed that needed more than intelligence, more than the power of will to reach the top. He had raised the issue to Derrick but as usual it had been trying to talk to Jesus Christ himself hanging from a cross of salvations, his dues already paid.

“People do succeed without bribing,” Derrick had told him.

That was probably true, but the probability that someone was going to do that, and when that someone was him was very close to zero.

It was not actually that he thought Derrick had not done enough. No, Derrick had done enough for him, more than his father had been willing to do. Derrick had seen to it that he gets a university education when he was already hopeless, when his father had said clean and flat that he had no right whatsoever to send him to school. Derrick had been there as a true brother to help him out (even if it was always done with that patronizing air), and he had been there after his university education to see to it that he gets a job (even if he was forcing him to go down a path that he did not actually think was feasible, or even like). And Derrick was trying to do it again, even after he had come back with his head bowed. The only problem was that Jude could smell it all; it was going to be the same thing all over, the same waste of money and time that could’ve been invested in doing something that could yield true fruits.

But you don't have a choice here, padre.

Well and if, he thought, just if something can come out of it, if he could get a job that was worth something then his plans would almost be fulfilled. It was something he had always toyed with (and more so now that Derrick was already married and not free financially to wave a helping-hand towards him if he could convince him), to get a well paying job and use the money earned to go back to school. He had actually taken the wee paying job he had now with that in mind, to save enough money and go back to school. It had been doable, doable until *the dragon lady* had walked into the house and hastened his growing up.

Yes, I could've managed with only Derrick around for longer than I did when she walked through the door.

He was not going to lose anything registering for the recruitment exercise though, he concluded. Everything was about trying your luck in this life, he told himself though deep inside he knew there was no such thing as luck when it came to such things in Cameroon.

But it didn't hurt to try at least.

And it's high time you started forgetting about that shit you call a job.

Chapter Eight

“I don’t think owning a phone’s a luxury, man.”
Jude looked up from the notebook in which he was logging the last sale he had made. The face before him had a characteristic warm smile that was mixed with some air of sincere stubbornness. The face belonged to a young man about his age, a young man who was shorter, rounder with fresh fat deposits already making his belly to swell. The man was always happy, always satisfied with life, and for all Jude knew the man was always going to be happy and satisfied with life. The young man was Niba Silvanus, one of the few people Jude had been able to hang around with.

“Excuse me,” Jude said with his own smile. At times Jude wondered why they were friends, what they had in common, and he always came up with the answer that there was nothing. They were different in every aspect of the word. But they were friends as it stood, one of those strange things that happened in real life.

“I said owning a phone’s not a luxury, it’s an absolute necessity.” Niba said leaning on the counter before Jude.

Jude shrugged, “If you say so.”

“Unless you’re planning to go back to the dark ages,” Niba studied him for a while, “I think the dark ages will suit you well. You really look like an early man.”

“That’s your point of view and you’re right.”

“I’m always right.”

They laughed; it always felt good when Niba was around, the laughter came freely.

“Man, you’re hard to find these days,” Niba said and whistled, “Worst of all now that you’re back in that prison.”

Jude rolled his eyes.

“I pity you,” Niba laughed, “I’ve spent like three years trying to get hold of you, and anytime I come here, your friend here,” he nodded towards where the other sales person in the shop, Okoro who was busily dusting off some second-hand refrigerators, “Keeps telling me you’re out.” Niba smiled,

and this time Jude saw something in the smile, something that was not supposed to be there, “So how’s the life?”

“Nothing bad yet,” he replied still not able to stop seeing that thing that was not supposed to be in Niba’s smile. There was something in Niba’s eyes, something in his smiling eyes that was not all that clear, and he knew Niba enough to know that something was going on behind those smiling eyes. Something that was...

Why are you trying to get hold of me? In fact why is everybody looking for me these days?

The “People looking for him syndrome” had started exactly three days ago. He had walked into the shop after making a delivery that afternoon to find a dumbfounded Okoro waiting for him almost at the door of the shop.

“What’s the matter with you?” he had asked making his way into the shop and dismissing Okoro’s dumbfounded face to be one of his numerous antics. Okoro was a man who had many faces and it just depended on the time of the day. He had longed classified Okoro as an aberration he could simply forget was around the place. But Okoro followed him this time almost drooling as he opened his mouth to speak, “Your friend was here,” Okoro said, spitting out the words as if they were already hurting his throat.

“Which one?” Jude murmured knowing that there was only one human being who could come into the shop looking for him.

But whoever had spooked Okoro could not be that person, he saw that straight away when he looked up from his notebook which was opened before him. There was something about Okoro, something that Jude noticed instantly but took time to comprehend, it was total disbelief.

“He was looking for you,” Okoro said the usual fidgeting taking over his hands helplessly. There was something he wanted to say, something that he wanted to say but did not know how to say it. It was there choking him, trying to come out, but he wanted desperately to create some suspense.

“What friend?” Jude asked curiosity stealing through him slowly, Okoro was a being of its kind but this was new, all this fidgeting and the drooling.

“You were in school together.”

What school? What’s the idiot talking about?

“The university,” Okoro said, almost biting and spitting out the word, the look of disbelief still there in his eyes. It was actually increasing in intensity, “He said you were his best friend in the university.”

“My best friend,” Jude wondered aloud. A *best* friend from his university days. Who on earth was that friend? Who was that person who could tell somebody that? Someone who actually knew where he worked, who had actually asked around and found out where he worked and came looking for him, actually telling Okoro that they had been friends back in the university. Who was that person? The truth was that Jude did not have any idea. He did not remember anybody from back then who would care enough to come asking around for him. The idea of a best friend from the university days was absurd. No, his life back then had been a secluded life, the type of life that only encouraged a human being to borrow deeper into that soil of seclusion. Borrow deeper and hide away from the world of the superior beings, seeking loneliness to keep from going insane in the face of reality. It was a joke, this idea of a best friend from his university days.

“My best friend,” he said again.

Okoro was nodding vigorously still looking at him with that disbelief in his eyes, “Yes, that’s what he said, that you were his best friend.”

A mysterious best friend! That was a joke.

“Did he tell you his name?” Jude asked.

Okoro thought for a while, the smile still on his face, that look of disbelief still there, “I don’t know,” he said, “I think he said something like David.”

“What about a number? Did he give you his number?”

“You don’t have a phone,” Okoro said with a sparkle in his eyes.

Thank you for reminding me, idiot.

David? Jude could not remember ever knowing anybody by that name, or anybody who had a name that sounded that way. Was Okoro just jerking him around? Was Okoro capable of that? No, *it is impossible*, Okoro was not sophisticated enough to try to jerk anybody around. Okoro was just a simple minded idiot and nothing else who was trying so hard to build a world of sophistication around his head. So, there was no way Okoro could come up with something so imaginative like that. There had definitely been somebody around the shop, somebody who was...

“He had a big shiny car,” Okoro delivered finally, a few teeth showing this time as his smile of triumph widened.

“What!?”

“A car, a big shinny car, you should’ve seen it,” Okoro said, “You should’ve seen the man; he looked just like a minister.”

That threw Jude off completely; it was the biggest impossibility he had ever heard.

Then as if that was not enough, when he had walked into the shop yesterday after his break, Okoro had welcomed him with the impossible rambling again, “You just missed him, he was here, he was here just a few minutes ago. You should’ve have seen the car.” And that look was there again. That look that said; *if you went to school as you say and if you were with this fellow then what are you doing here in this shop poor as a church rat while the fellow is better off and driving around in a big shiny car?*

Because life’s wicked...

And now Niba was here and there was a look in his eyes that he could not fully explain.

Jude looked at Niba for a while not knowing what to say or do. He could sense suspense in the air, the type that always came about when someone was going to deliver a bomb. But what bomb? After a while he said, “So how are things?”

“Not bad, man, not bad, business is moving just smoothly,” Niba said with a smile, a smile that Jude could see was now a little staged.

Something is missing from this picture, Jude thought. Something is missing from this picture but I don’t know what that something is.

Chapter Nine

People call it a lot of things, but most of the times they just call it the sixth sense. It is that other imaginary sense, that other aspect to know things without using the normal five known senses. It is great in detecting something abnormal in the air before that something is evident. In some people it is so developed and strong that they tend to see things from very far off before they can even touch the horizon (This is where a lot of freaks end up). In others it is so dormant they can walk into a whole lot of trouble without even a tiny clue (the completely dumb wade in this stream comfortably). While in others, the normal category, it is just enough to start nipping the brain at anytime something out of the ordinary is in the air.

Jude was in this category of those who just had enough of that sixth sense, but that afternoon he could swear he was in the first category. It was there in the air; that sense that something was coming for him, that sense that a dark cloud was coming, a dark cloud that was going to fully engulf him. And though he could not place a finger on the nature of that dark cloud, he knew without any doubt that he was not going to like it one bit.

And Niba was not making it any easy, just standing there before him trying hard to look completely normal and calm and failing. He knew Niba was just trying to act like a friend, delaying to deliver the coup de grace.

But he hated the waiting, it was worst than knowing. It was a hand deep inside his mind, gnawing at the walls of his mind and he did not like it at all.

Why don't you just tell me what's going on?

But what could be going on? He wondered. He could not think of something right now that could link him and Niba enough to cause him any trouble. He was not one of Niba's internet scamming buddies. So, what was it then? Why was the picture before him all wrong? What could shake Niba enough to be evident in his usual warm and crafty face? That was something he could not place his finger on, but the feeling was there, gnawing at his mind as he waited for the coup de grace.

"How's the prison?" Niba asked, drumming his fingers on the counter and this time avoiding looking at Jude. It was just one of those questions

which came along when every other method of delaying the inevitable was no longer on the table. Jude knew it and that fact made that invisible hand gnawing at his brain to become vigorous.

“I’ll survive,” Jude said and tried a smile.

“You’re strong, man,” Niba stifled a yawn, “You’re really strong. I can’t stay in that house for a day.”

Yeah, because life was handed to you on a silver platter before you even came to this world. And you’re not here to tell me how you can’t stay in my prison for a day. Just let it out...

Niba tried another forceful yawn and said, “I need a beer.”

Jude smiled weakly knowing that it was coming, the coup de grace, it was in the air and he could feel it, “I’m still tied down here,” he said.

“Too bad.”

You didn’t come here to buy me a beer; you know I’m never free until around 5pm. So, what’s it you want to see me for?

“Hey, what are you looking at me like that for? Don’t I have the right to at least wish for a beer?”

He had the right, but...

One thing about Niba was that he was the type who could’ve had almost everything they wanted out of life. The type who had learnt that knowledge that had been fed him since he was a baby, that knowledge that everything was easy to get, that all around him was his, and Niba had learnt it more than he should have. He had learnt it enough to turn that knowledge into his only purpose for existing. Then when the cautionary notes had started to sound, he had simply created his own society whose motto was so simple; *I do what pleases me and what pleases me alone.*

Niba was the only son in a family of four, the last child in that family. His family was a well-to-do family, and Niba being the last child with an elder sister who was already all settled and married to a man who was also well on his feet, was like a tiny prince. All the family was willing to turn their hands in guiding him through life, to making sure he was someone in future. But Niba was the type who could turn every well intentioned endeavor from his family into a well organized siege. He being the attacking army, his family locked inside a wall of agony as he launched attack after attack at them, marveling at

the amount of pain he was capable of making all these well intentioned people feel.

“I’m trying, man,” he would tell Jude with a huge satisfied smile when the issue was brought up, “I’m really trying, it’s just that they’re too blind to see.”

And in his manner of trying, Niba had tried enough to be able to claim to everybody with an ear that he had a bachelor’s degree in Geography from the University of Yaounde 1. And always ready to say he had only spent three years in that university to get his degree, a sign of how serious he had been since that particular university was not known to cough out graduates easily.

But to those without ears, he would say the truth without any hesitation.

“What do I need a degree for?” he would ask Jude, “Everybody seems to have a degree these days, and I don’t see them doing anything with them. Look at you with your own degree. It’s all useless, man.”

So, the true version of his university studies (which he always told Jude with pride and a very satisfied smile), was simple. Niba had registered in the university the first year, and that had ended like that, a simple zip. He had simply registered because he was still naïve and did not know how things functioned out there (in his own words). But in less than a month he could no longer see any point in attending lectures (“It was just like sitting in an Italian opera hall and listening to a stupid fool sing something he himself could not understand. Can you imagine that?”). He had then discovered how to spend the three years judiciously, by learning the arts of making fast money from internet scams and from lying constantly to his supportive family. When the three years were over he had simply walked into Bonamoussadi with a palm full of cash and paid for a pretty convincing university diploma from a good natured forger who was always ready to help any self appointed rebel.

“A paper is a paper,” Niba would say.

What always amazed Jude was the fact that Niba knew full well that it was the end as far as his education career was concerned. He had tried and brought home his fake diploma now resting perfectly in the family archives for everyone to see. And that was enough as far as he was concerned, that was enough because that was all he could afford to do.

“I admire you at times, man,” Niba would say, “You like the headache of going to school.” He would laugh, “The old man and his archaic brain, can

you imagine what he told me the other day? That he wanted me to write ENAM or go back to school and enroll for masters. Can you imagine me doing all that? I think the fool still sees me as some important person; he can't just see what I really am."

But he would promptly collect every coin that was destined for all the well intentioned projects and carefully squander it in bottle after bottle of beer, his triumphant smile stamped on his face.

"Was the old man mad!" he would whistle when his family was raising a voice of protest, "You should've seen his face, I was afraid he was going to have a heart attack." He would smile his triumphant smile and say with a wave of the hand, "It was just chicken change after all. He doesn't know that I can pay him monthly if I want."

That was a little exaggerated, but from what Niba was getting from his internet scamming he could've lived his motto to the fullest without driving his family crazy...

But that would no longer be the true Niba.

Jude blinked...The Niba standing before him today was not the one man rebel who was trying very hard to destroy his family. This was his friend who had something to tell him, something that he was not going to...

"...You could've seen his face," Niba was saying, laughing as he spoke. Jude could no longer remember the story he had been telling him, it was probably one about his numerous online clients, "He was...hey, man?"

"Huh?"

"You okay?"

Jude nodded, "I'm fine, shouldn't I be?"

Why don't you just spill it out?

"I saw Mabel the other day," Niba said his voice and face taking a serious note, his voice becoming quiet.

Jude felt some air escape from inside, it was a reflex act. His brain was suddenly crowded with images he did not want to see. He tried to speak but his voice came out hoarse and he had to clear his throat.

Niba was looking at him.

"What?" Jude managed, his voice coming out louder than he had intended. He saw Okoro look over at his corner of the shop, a dull interest taking over his face.

“Mabel, you remember her don’t you?”

Jude nodded, he was cold, cold in all the wrong places and he could not say why.

It’s nothing!

“She told me she had been trying to reach you, but you know you don’t have a contact...”

Ever since he had walked out of jail he had not had the time to go see her, he had been busy trying to cope with his new jail cell in Derrick’s house. But why would she want to...?

“What did she want to see me for?”

Niba shrugged.

Something is wrong, and I can almost place a finger on it. Something is very wrong and I’m not going to like it.

It’s nothing!

He truly wanted to believe that, but...

“What on earth did she want to see me for?” Jude asked again, he did no longer want to know what was missing from the picture. He wished Niba had not walked into the shop that afternoon.

Niba shrugged again.

But you know why she’s looking for me. You know everything and it’s written on your face.

It’s nothing!

He felt the bubble start to rise from inside, Niba knew everything and it was his damn fault that he was in this shit. His damn fault and he knew it. He had started all this, led him into it without giving him a chance.

Calm down!

It’s nothing!

But it was something and he could feel it.

“I don’t know, man,” Niba said.

“But you...”

“Hey, man! Nobody’s dead, calm down.”

Okoro stole another look at them, his ears growing an inch larger to catch whatever he could.

“Everything’s okay,” Niba said in a quiet voice, “She just gave me this to give you.” He took out a folded piece of paper from his chest pocket and

placed it on the counter before Jude. The piece of paper looked dirty, almost brown.

Everything was not okay, not at all.

You don't want to touch this! You don't want to see what's written on it.

But why?

Jude felt his legs start to shake.

God, what was this again? Why was this happening to him?

The piece of paper carefully folded and lying before him was a snake, a very poisonous snake that was going to bite him without any mercy once he touched it. It was going to bite and kill him without any pity.

God, don't let it be! Please don't let it be. Let me be wrong, let me be completely wrong. He suddenly felt a strong urge to visit the toilet, an urge that was accompanied by more shaking in his lower limbs. He glanced up at Niba and Niba shrugged but he could see it written all over his face; she had told him something. He slowly with a visibly shaky hand picked up the piece of paper. Slowly he unfolded it; it weighed a ton in his hands.

He swallowed dryly.

When he saw the almost illegible words on the piece of paper, a tiny yet audible moan escaped his throat.

Chapter Ten

Such things happen, he wanted to tell himself. Such things happen to people around the world, they had been happening and they will always be happening. It had happened to people far greater than him, presidents and kings and all the like. It was normal just like breathing was normal. It was nothing big, nothing at all. He wanted to believe all that, wanted to accept that consoling reality, but there was no way he could do that.

It's nothing!

But it was something, even if there was still that voice inside that was trying to tell him that this was not happening, that it was all...

A dream? Was this all a dream? Was this all some cruel dream, some cruel joke that was being played on him, some dream that he would wake up and find all gone? A nightmare that was going to disappear into the mist of forgetfulness once he was fully awake?

It's nothing!

But it was not a dream, and even as much as he wished it were, he knew he was wide awake, standing in the shop, holding the piece of paper in his hand and that Niba was standing there before him. But right now he was willing to accept any absurdity that could come into his head. It could be a joke, somehow she's trying to get at me, he wanted to believe that too, but he knew better. She was not capable of that. Or could Niba be the one playing the joke? Could Niba decide to jerk him around in that manner? No, he did not think so, Niba was a lot of things but that was not something he could do. And that look in his eyes was genuine.

God, why is this happening to me? Why me? He would've loved to hear an answer, but there was none, God was on vacation again.

Jude looked at the almost illegible words on the piece of paper again, those letters that were printed out on the paper as if they had been refusing to appear on the paper, those words that looked like the author had taken a century to put them on paper. The words looked bigger as he stared at them, bigger and growing bigger...

"Hey, Man?"

Jude looked up at Niba.

Pregnant!

“Are you okay, what’s...?”

She’s pregnant, pregnant and I don’t know what I’m going to do about it. She’s pregnant, can’t you understand that? Pregnant and...

He opened his mouth to say a word, but nothing came out but the sound of his dry lips parting.

“Hey...”

“Pregnant,” Jude murmured.

“What? Who’s...?”

“She’s pregnant.”

Okoro stole a glance at them, but Jude was far gone to notice it.

“What’re you...?” Niba was trying to sound genuinely surprised.

“She’s pregnant,” Jude said, he could still feel the shaking, even in his voice.

“I can’t believe it.”

“Look at this,” Jude placed the unfolded piece of paper before Niba.

Niba looked down at it without picking it up and shook his head. “I can’t believe it,” he repeated.

I can’t believe it too.

But he could believe it, voice of reason told him. He could believe it because he knew how it had come about, because he had been dumb enough to end up in here. Not believing it was like trying to build a dam only when the river had already changed its course...

But still, how did I end up here? How was I stupid enough to be carried away in this river? This river that looked so clean and inviting; this river that looked so tiny and easy to cross, but a river that was very deep?

He looked at Niba, and felt the hate start to rise inside; this was all Niba’s fault, all Niba’s fault and he knew it. Niba had taken him for a ride and now here he was. Niba had manipulated him, taken him out to the wolves and allowed the wolves to tear him to pieces.

It is all your fault! He wanted to shout to his face, all your doing.

Granted Niba had been the one with the knowledge, the one with the brain, the one with all the experience. But he had accepted to come along for the ride, accepted without much prodding. So, if he really wanted to hate and

blame somebody, that somebody was no one but him. He had known all along what was going to happen, had felt the longing as Niba had explained the ropes to him, and had decided to go along for the ride with enthusiasm.

But...

It had all started one evening, far before his time in jail, after a couple of beers (that he wanted to blame now for having dulled every sense of reality in his brain), Niba had made the suggestion. It was going to be easy, a simple one nightstand that could be forgotten the next day.

“But what if she recognizes us the next day?” he had asked Niba.

“Come on, man. Do you actually believe that or are you just trying to chicken out?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think I’d like some prostitute recognizing me the next day.”

“Look, let me ask you a question; how do you think she’s going to recognize you? How many customers does she have in one night? She doesn’t have a camera, man, so chill.” Niba laughed, “Don’t worry she’s all about her business, all of them are that way. There’s no way she’ll ever remember anybody’s face, I doubt they even look at anybody’s face.” He patted Jude on the shoulder, “All they care about is how much you can pay, that’s all, man.”

Jude swallowed all that in, it made sense.

“Do you know her that well?”

“Not really, but I’ve seen her face and she’s the only face that any sensible person will want to look at around that area.”

That had been convincing enough for somebody who had never had a girl before, somebody who spent hours and hours dreaming about what it would be like, fantasizing about what it would feel like. It was convincing enough to give that person a push to try for the real thing and forget about his hand that had been so accustomed to relieving that constant pressure that was always building around his groin. It was a chance to finally relief that pressure in the appropriate manner...

“Don’t act like a baby, man, have some courage,” Niba had coached as he dragged him, his legs shaking, down the line of waiting girls. The girls were in the shadows, the whole street covered in darkness. He could catch a brief gleam of a girl now and then; all barely wearing any form of clothing.

Some of them were talking to potential clients. Jude felt like running away, it was the first time in his life that he was in such a place. In fact, he could not believe that there was such a place in Bamnenda; that such a place existed in the town where he passed his days. His heart was pounding in his chest, pounding loud enough that he could actually hear the sound.

I don't want to do this.

But Niba had led him through that line of hungry wolves, most of them, the ones not busily talking to a potential client, calling on them as they walked down their street, till they reached their destination.

Niba had done the bargaining, Jude avoiding even to look at the girl. He could feel her eyes on him; eyes that he did not want to see him, to see his face. All he wanted to do was run away, disappear, but his feet were held in place, glued in place before her. He could hear the bargaining, though it seemed to be coming from another world, the sound of his pounding heart occupying his ears and overshadowing any other sound; the price was 1500frs for the two of them and she accepted only after some pleading and at the end threatening from Niba (“We can look for another girl who’s willing to accept 1500. What do you think we’re even buying? Huh?”).

She had slept with the two of them.

And afterward, when he was all sober, realization had hit him. He had spent days hating himself, vowing to himself time and time again that it was never going to happen again, that he was never going to take that path again.

But some days later, he had found himself standing at the same spot again, before her, tight lipped and shivering. And he had been alone...

Chapter Eleven

*T*hat first time should've been the only time.

It was now later in the evening, Niba having succeeded in convincing him to drink a beer with him.

"What you need right now is a beer."

Niba was paying as usual.

The first time should've been the first and the last time. What did I get myself into? Damn! If only I had been able to respect my vow after that first time. If only...

"I hate this life," he murmured.

"It's not that bad, man."

"You don't understand."

"These things happen every day, and to people."

"I didn't want it to happen, maybe some people want it to happen to them."

And she's just a...

God knows I didn't want this. God knows I'm not prepared for this.

"Look it's not the end of the world, in fact it's nothing."

Easy to say when you're not in my shoes, buddy.

He only shook his head and smiled vaguely.

Niba looked up from his beer bottle after a while and asked, "So, what are you going to do?"

Jude shrugged, "I don't know."

"Look I can..."

Jude shook his head, he could see the picture but he did not want to hear the words. The picture was big enough and he knew in some crazy way that it was logical, very logical.

"You can't be thinking of..." Niba started again.

"I'm not thinking about anything," Jude said, making an effort not to snap at Niba. He knew Niba was just trying to be a good friend, just trying to look at that picture too, that picture of logic.

Niba took a sip of his beer and looked at him, "I know it's sudden, but I'm your friend and I don't want to see you end up suffering about this."

Jude nodded.

“You take everything so seriously all the time, you need to learn to relax, man.”

Jude tried another weak smile.

“I’m serious, man.”

They sat for a while in silence, Niba indicating to the barman to serve them again. After the new beers were before them and Niba had taken a long drink he said, “It’s not like we don’t know her. We know her, man, and she’s a...” he took another drink, “She’s not the type to even start thinking about anything silly.”

She was a prostitute, and that was the royal truth. She was a prostitute whose job was standing in the shadows and hunting for half drunk and half crazy clients, poor idiots like him.

“So, you need to start thinking about what to do.”

Jude nodded, the picture was there again. “I’ve to see her, talk with her before I can decide anything.”

“Good, but let me tell you something, don’t listen to what she has to say. They always have a way to turn things around.”

Jude nodded.

Why me? Jude asked the almost empty bar that was going to be full before nightfall with every sort of person, some of them with their own problems hanging over their shoulders.

The almost empty bar did not answer him.

Chapter Twelve

It happened again and it had not been in his plan, but it happened. He had tried to avoid it, but to no avail. It happened even after that effort. It was like there was some mighty hand, some invisible mighty hand that was always standing by to take control of himself; take control and manipulate him like a puppet on strings, only letting him go when the deed was already done. Yes, letting go when it was time for the hate and shame to surface and stare him squarely on the face. When it was time for that hate and shame to wash his face with wave after wave of its horrible breath.

God why? Why did I do this again?

Jude stared at his hands in silence, a frown on his forehead, as if the answer was there in his hands, as if some reasonable answer was going to leap out of his sweaty palms and kick his brain, some final enlightenment that could clear everything for him. But the answer was not there, not in the sweaty palms, not anywhere. In fact, the answer was lost somewhere in the clouds, clouds that were always going to be beyond his grasp. The answer was drifting in those clouds, playing a game of “Catch me if you can,” with him.

What’ve I done again? How could I do this again when...?

He felt like crying; it was beyond any reason that he had done this again. Beyond any reason that at this point in time he should’ve let himself go so easily.

You just lost control again, pal. You just lost control of your brain and actually handed it to that crazy thing between your legs.

But was he that stupid? Was he that senseless? A donkey that could not even raise a hand to defend itself, a donkey that could easily be led to the slaughter slab without even knowing, without even raising a hand to protest?

No!

What’ve I done again? Why did I do this again?

The deed is done, buddy and as you know what’s done is done. There’s no need crying over spilled milk.

That was logical, but he could not stop hating himself, he could not stop feeling that blind hate mixed with shame that always came afterward, when

the act was already done; that shame that said without doubt that he had descended to the bottom of the pit again.

God, I'm a beast.

The bed creaked as she turned on it behind him. He was sitting on the bed, still not wearing anything, still not able to bring himself to pick up his clothes from the heap on the floor. He heard a tiny moan escape from her throat, that moan that was the residual sound of previous weeping. He felt a familiar anger, a familiar anger that was directed at her, a familiar anger that was directed to that moan coming out of her throat.

Jesus, why?

Why did I do this again?

Why had he not been able to control himself? Just control himself this one time, just this one time that things were already down the drain? He felt a lump climb to his throat; he felt his eyes start to grow heavy. He was going to cry. He sniffed back the tears and looked at his palms again, trying to swallow that painful lump that was almost blocking his throat. He hated the fact that it had happened again, hated the feeling of hurt and the shame that came afterward, but there was nothing he could do about it. It had happened.

Stop racking yourself then!

It's the room, this murky smelly room, the room and her. They have a hold on me, a terrible hold that I can't break from.

You don't know what you're saying.

But...

It was her and her dark murky smelly room. It was her and her room because they had that force, that powerful invisible force that always took control of him once he walked into the room (and even when he had been feeling repulsion before walking in like today). Somehow there was a force around her and her room that could make him do things even when he had vowed not to do them, even when the thought of it had been repulsive enough to make him want to puke. It was strong enough, the force in the room, to possess him and keep him coming like a dummy, and only letting go when the demon of desire inside him was already calmed.

Well, if it had not been that powerful force around her, what could've brought him back after the first time? After all that shame and self-hate, after all that swearing and vowing before God that he was never going to let

himself go carelessly again. Yes, she had a force around her, and it was that force that had driven him like a donkey till he was now in this situation, in this mess.

It was funny, because if someone had told him, or just voiced out something in the lightest words that said he would one day find himself in such a condition, he would've kicked the person's teeth out and fed them to him. Even if such an idea had formed in his own head, that he would be wrapped around such a woman, in such a relationship, God, he would have smashed his own head and pulled that diabolic idea straight out and buried it somewhere deep where it could not leap back up and get into his head. But here he was...

Yes, and here he was, after the self-hating, after the constant vows. Here he was even after the mess he was in, after the knowledge of the pregnancy. Here he was after learning where his madness had taken him, sitting almost in the same position as always, the heap of clothes lying on the floor beside his feet evidence of what he had done again. And all because that powerful force that somehow controlled him had not allowed him to stay back after the first time, only because that powerful force had been able to take him to her that second time alone. That second time had been his mistake, and he hated that particular second time now with all his might...

It was that second time, that horrible mistake of a second time, that had started him down this path. That second time had succeeded in switching off all the light bulbs inside his brain, made him realize how easy it was to continue getting what he had always longed for. It had shown him the simplicity that Niba had explained to him, the simplicity of longing for sex and going out and getting it without any complications, with only the help of a few coins. That second time had helped to plot the map for him, the map down the rusty route, making it easy for him to continue coming back. And he had continued coming back, being her regular client, knowing that his financial situation was going completely downhill, but still coming. And then one day out of the blue, she had said to him, her sad eyes directed at his face, in a voice he would always remember with a cold in the pit of his stomach, "You don't have to pay me."

He was already standing in front of her his hand outstretched, the act already completed. Her words stunned him and for a while he just stood

there looking at the banknote in his hand, not knowing what to say or do and not wanting to look at her eyes that always had that sad quality about them, a sadness that was so deep and always ready to get deeper at any moment. Then he had found his voice, a voice that was all hoarse and shaky, "Why?"

She said nothing, just sat there on the bed, still naked, her sad eyes now staring at nothing in particular.

"Why?" Jude asked again.

"I don't know," she said slowly after a while, those eyes turning and focusing on him again.

"But I..." Jude started, the words getting lost in his throat. He turned away from her. For one crazy moment, all he wanted to do was run, just run out into the dark street full of waiting prostitutes, just run and never return to that part of the world.

"I don't know why," she said again, "But I don't think you should pay me again."

He was starting to understand what she meant. She no longer wanted him around. And that was okay.

But what she said next was, "You look like a good person to me."

And finally she had told him what she really meant, finally leading him to this dark murky smelling room which belonged to her. Her world away from the dark shadow filled street. They had started a union, not exactly a relationship, but a union that involved him dropping by now and then and always early enough before she could go out for her nighttime job. Dropping now and then for speechless, almost emotionless sessions of sex.

And finally here he was...

"Man, what happened to a condom anywhere?" Niba had asked him that evening before they had left the bar.

"What're you...?"

"A condom, man, it prevents such things."

And a lot more.

Jude felt like smiling. A condom is a wonderful device. The greatest gift from God or the devil (depending on your point of view), to young people who want to experiment with the mystery of sex. It is like a sword and a shield at the same time and somehow the world believes in it with all their might, waving it around at anytime they want to make an impression.

But what the world forgets is that those who wave that sword and shield around are humans, and that humans have a certain contagious disease. A contagious disease that starts silently and grows up taking over every tiny cell of the body till they can't ignore it any longer. That disease is called; trust. And it is a wonderful disease because its major point of attack is the brain, turning it around till every serious cautionary note is thrown away.

That happened to Jude and Mabel. It happened so slowly, till at one point the major question was, what's there to be afraid of anyway? It was so subtle, the takeover by that contagious disease, that the condom was forgotten without any speech, without any sound. It was simply there one day, and another day it was not there, its reign finally brought to an end. And life went on without any hesitation once it was forgotten, until it was time to harvest the follies of that slow contagious disease.

And now I'm here.

Chapter Thirteen

She turned around on the bed again behind him, another tiny moan escaping from her throat. She was now staring at his naked back, and he could feel her sad eyes on his back. It was something he had never been able to explain, that ability to always feel her eyes on him even if he could not see her staring at him. There were times, just like this time, that he wanted to know what was happening behind those sad eyes, behind her plain sad face. She was probably thinking about him right now, he told himself. She was thinking about him, about all that had happened and that was still happening, and probably hating everything just as he did. It was possible; at least she was a human being. He could see her hating him, hating him for sitting there on her bed, hating him for his continuity, hating him for what that continuity had finally led to. She was the one with the fetus now growing in her womb, and she had the right to hate him.

Or was she enjoying this? Was she happy behind her sad eyes? Happy for the effect the news had on him? Happy for the helpless situation he was now in?

It was possible, he thought, it was possible that she could be actually enjoying this, that she was just a good actress when she shed those tears. It was possible and he wanted to believe it, but somehow he knew it was just his hopeless mind trying to create another defensive scenario, trying to point a finger of blame at someone else.

And at times it was actually better to think that way, to embrace the lie, to look for possibilities when there were none. It was the natural thing to do. Just like he had walked into her room with still a few strands of hope in his mind that she would somehow say it was just a joke (and even when he knew deep down that it was only a fairy tale he was thinking of, for she was not the type to think of some cruel humor like that. She was the type who was so embedded in her sad plainness that there was no space left for any humor). And when she had confirmed that she was actually pregnant, brandishing her Laboratory results before him, another set of defenses had started popping up. He had started believing that she had planned it all along to trap him, that

she had known all along when the pregnancy was due to happen, letting him to go down the road without any caution.

“I didn’t know anything,” she had cried back at him, her face hot with anger, “How can you think such a thing? How could you think that I’m capable of such a thing?”

But women were capable of such things, he had wanted to fire back at her. It wasn’t unheard of, and he wanted to let her know that. But then there was that question; what for? Why would she have wanted to trap him? What did she have to gain from trapping him with the pregnancy? It was absurd. He had nothing, no money, no secure future, nothing that she could want to hang onto. He was just another burden, a worthless burden at that and even to her.

A parasite!

She sighed softly behind him on the bed as if she could read through the absurdities in his mind. He heard her sit up on the bed, and then slowly got off the bed. A few seconds later he heard her pouring water into a bucket, and then there was water splashing. He did not want to turn around and look, but there was no need for him to do that, the image was already in his mind; an image of her squatting over the bucket and splashing water between her legs. It was an image that he could not stop himself from seeing, even if he did not want to see it.

Jude closed his eyes.

Why do I keep coming here?

There was no ready answer to that question. He did not know if his coming here was just because of the sex or because of something else. Something that was...

What? What something?

“Do you even care about me?” she had asked him that evening before bursting into hot tears, “Do you even care what happens to me? How I feel about all this? Huh? Do you?” That had come out after he had started asking questions about the pregnancy, precisely after he had made the mistake of wondering aloud if he was even responsible for the pregnancy. He had wanted to play that card, that common card that people in his situation loved to play, with the idea that generally women kept several sex partners. It was a dumb and desperate card even if it would’ve looked a little bit appropriate

here for she was not just a woman having normal sexual relationships; she was a prostitute who sold herself for money, a whore who could do anything for money.

“Who else do you think can be responsible for it? Who else have you seen coming here apart from you?”

A lot of other people, a lot of other poor fools like me whose penises seem to run their brains.

But that was not the case and he knew it. He was just trying to grope his way up a steep and slippery slope. A slope that was only designed to make him slide back down at anytime he attempted to grope his way up.

“Anyway, I’m just a prostitute,” she said, “Just a prostitute and nothing else...”

“I’m not saying...”

“That’s what you’re saying. I’m only a useless prostitute,” the tears running down her cheeks now.

“No, look...I don’t mean that. I’m just trying to...”

“What? What’re you trying to say?”

He opened his mouth to say something but nothing came out.

“I understand perfectly. I’m just a prostitute to you, *a nothing*. That’s what’s in your mind, that’s what you want to say.”

He had opened his mouth to speak again, but nothing came to his mind. He was suddenly lacking in words and ideas.

“Just admit it,” she said, “just admit it and leave me alone,” she ran the back of her hand over her cheek, the hand coming off dripping wet with tears.

It was not her words that had broken into his ribcage and cut his heart into two; it was not even the tears streaming down from her eyes and running down her cheeks like rivers. It was the look in those her sad eyes, those eyes that were searching his own face and seeing through the mask he was trying to wear; that divided his heart into two. It was those sad eyes that were able to see whatever was hidden deep in his heart; that could open doors in his heart that were locked. Those eyes were too much to bear, and there was no way he could just stand and let them tear his soul into bits, something they were capable of doing. So, without any plan, without any willfulness, without any anticipation he had tried to console her, to cover

those eyes, and had ended up in bed with her naturally, her tears still flowing as she clutched him to her.

“What’re we going to do?” she asked finally.

They were now both dressed, but the air was still filled with electricity.

“It’s late,” Jude said not trying to look at her. It was late and he knew it was going to be another problem knocking on Derrick’s door and hoping for someone to get out of bed and open it for him. It was always the pretty irony in life, when things started getting bad, they just took an express road to do so. Niba had come with the news in the afternoon and here he was pretty much in the night, already hating himself for letting go again and en route for a head on collision with Derrick.

Maybe you should just spend the night here.

Jude shook his head.

“I know it’s late, but...”

“I don’t know yet,” Jude cut her, still avoiding looking into her sad eyes again. The air was still filled with a lot of charged electricity particles, a lot of them, and the types that could only be conducted with care to avoid a serious spark.

She sat on the bed and started chewing her fingernails. That habit was always accompanied by a worried look that gave her already sad face the quality of a dark rain cloud. He knew that the picture was there before her too, she could see the roads that were available, but he had to lead her down any of those roads.

“We’re going to think of something,” Jude offered.

She nodded without looking up at him, still chewing her finger nails.

“We’ll think of what to do,” Jude said again.

She nodded, “Yes.”

She was ready to accept any road he decided for her he could see that, it was all on his shoulders, all his burden to carry.

God!

“Do... decide fast,” she said to him before he left her room.

Chapter Fourteen

He finally reached Derrick's house that eventful evening. It was already a few minutes past 10pm. He was anticipating and hating the fact that he was going to knock at the door and stand there waiting for the door to be open for him by an annoyed Derrick and for the obvious questions to start flying. The obvious questions that were going to be accompanied by a patronizing lesson on morality and on walking about in the night. But when he reached the door it was still unlocked.

Derrick was sitting alone in the living room, staring at the television screen and probably actually seeing nothing. He had that too familiar look, that look that always came about when he and his *dragon lady* had been at each other's throat. Or more precisely when *the dragon lady* had been at his throat. It was becoming frequent (that all so familiar look on Derrick's face), and Jude somehow had that sense of premonition that it was going to keep getting worse. And somewhere deep inside, he believed he was the reason it was getting worse and was going to keep getting worse. It was his presence in this place, his presence that was like a catalyst.

It's because you're here, all those constant angry words flying around. She doesn't want you here or anybody for that matter.

But she'd always been that way.

It's getting worse and you know it.

But it's not my fault. I didn't ask to come here; I don't even want to be here.

The strain was showing on Derrick. That constant strain of having to be on the tip of his toes, of having to walk into the house already knowing that it was just going to be another plain night of nagging, another plain night of having to stand before a one man court of law and answer to accusations that were completely bogus. It was showing in that look of weariness, showing in that strained manner he tried constantly to keep a semblance of normalcy, showing in that constant air of belief he had around him; that false belief that he was living with a woman in his house and not some nutcase who could have excelled in a mental asylum for the criminally insane. The sight of that constant strain was always capable of getting to him, for it showed just how vulnerable Derrick was, just how lonely he was even when he had that all too

irritating patronizing and all-is-normal air around him. It always somehow reminded him of their mother, a woman who had simply decided to wear that strain as a gown, wrapped it around her and bowed to it as her husband had chosen his own path in life. That path that had left them all completely wanting, that path that was the reason for all the trouble he had faced and was still facing in life, that path that in some twisted way, Derrick was following blindly. He felt the familiar anger start to rise.

“Where’ve you been all day long?” Derrick asked without looking at him. The question came out in a conversational tone, a tone so free of all the patronizing air that Jude felt his heart miss a beat.

“I needed to talk to a friend,” Jude replied.

“Okay,” Derrick nodded.

Why are you doing this to yourself? Jude wondered looking at Derrick. How was it that Derrick could not see what he was doing to himself? How was it that he could not look at the mirror and see the truth as it was, that truth that the woman he called a wife was only a slow poison, a slow poison that was only going to kill him at the end of the day, first drive him mad and then kill him while he was lying there his mind already gone to kingdom come.

It's not your problem, padre.

But why can't he just see what's happening to him, why can't he just make the decision and kick the psychopathic demon out before she drives him completely crazy?

I told you it's not your problem, padre. You've your own shit and it's not simply shit, so stop looking at somebody else's shit.

Jude sat before the television screen; he suddenly felt that need to assure Derrick that he still had somebody who cared about him. He wanted to reach out and give him a hand of companionship.

Maybe you can *tell him about your own issues, buddy.*

What'd I tell him?

I don't know...maybe everything.

He won't understand.

But he's your...

Jude shook his head slowly.

On the television screen he could see it was one of the popular South American soap operas that were being broadcasted. The soap operas that

were all absolutely the same, always revolving around the same silly love stories; two people falling madly in love, two people from two different social classes who are not supposed to fall in love. A lot of concerned people would be trying very hard to separate them to no avail. And then at the end everybody would come to an understanding and allow the lovers to get married and live happily ever after. Jude hated the soap operas because they had no fiber of truth around them. There was nothing as fictitious as a happy ending. Life was not designed to be that way, and when there was a bunch of pretty looking models on the screen trying to emphasize that lie, he felt like they were insulting him directly.

“Are you alright?”

Derrick’s question brought him back to the world. They had been sitting there in silence for a while, two men haunted by demons they both knew so well, sitting there and staring at the screen but seeing nothing but the faces of their demons staring back at them from the screen.

“Hmmm?” Jude wiped his face.

“Are you alright?” Derrick repeated the question again. Derrick was looking at him now with a look that said he could see something, deduce something that was showing on the surface.

“I’m fine,” Jude said and tried to smile but only a weak smile came out, and that was only going to show how not fine he was, “I’m just tired, that’s all.”

“You look worried, almost like something’s wrong.”

Now I wish you were asleep or being your old blind and everything-is-normal self.

“What’s the matter?” Derrick asked.

“Nothing, I’m just tired.”

Derrick turned back to staring at the screen before him. He sat for a while in silence, Jude waiting for another set of inquiries to start, but after a while Derrick asked, “You haven’t eaten anything yet, have you?”

Jude shook his head, he had forgotten about food and even hearing it mentioned now did not bring back the image of food. He did not believe any food on earth was capable of staying in his stomach that night.

“There’s food in the kitchen, I think.”

“I’m really not hungry.”

They continued sitting there, staring at the television screen as the programs on the screen changed one after another, their own demons never changing.

The child started promptly as he laid his head on his pillow. It was coming from his head as usual, the vibration of that high pitched screaming causing his teeth to clang together like some cymbals. He had known the night was going to be a sleepless one, just the load of thoughts running through his mind, but the child was making it a spectacularly horrible one.

For one tiny flickering moment, he saw himself walk into Derrick's room, pick up the tiny child and smash its head on the wall.

That would shut it up.

Chapter Fifteen

The next couple of days were the longest he had ever experienced. Each day was so slow in passing that it felt like a whole week. And he spent them trying hard to wear a mask of normalcy over his face, a mask that was completely porous. His brain was wearing its own mask, a mask of denial. It was not denial of responsibility for the pregnancy; that was already settled (even if at times he still found his mind in that landscape of fantasy filled with a lot of possibility that all this was just a dream). It was denial to see the picture clearly, to look at the choices presented to him by life squarely. It was a denial that was not helping him one bit, for it was all wrapped around hypocrisy; a hypocrisy that rendered his facial mask more porous.

“What’s the problem?” Derrick would ask from time to time, seeing through that mask, “You know for a week now you’ve been like a ghost around the house. What’s the matter?”

“What’re you talking about? I’m fine.”

“You’re not fooling anyone.”

Derrick would shake his head and smile that particularly irritating smile that was all adult, all knowing. It was as if somehow Derrick could see what was going on in his head. There were times he actually thought Derrick knew exactly what was wrong with him, that he somehow knew what he had done.

“You know if you’ve something worrying you, anything at all, you can tell me,” Derrick said one day.

“No, I’m fine.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

But nothing was okay anywhere, not even back at the shop where an ever fidgeting and always knowing Okoro was there. He would be cleaning an already cleaned item almost hypnotically as if it was some sacred religious relic that had been touched by the hand of the pope himself, then he would say something out of the blue, “You know I can help.”

“Help me with what?”

“With the problem you have,” eyeing him with the corner of his eyes always, a lot of amusement dancing around those eyes.

“Who told you I’ve any problem?”

“Nobody. But...”

“I don’t have any problem.”

It was there, the truth that everyone around him could see there was something wrong. What he did not know was if all those people (excluding the always eavesdropping Okoro) could guess the nature of his problem. He did not think so, and he wanted it to remain that way. He could not see any way on earth he could walk up to Derrick one morning and start ranting about it. That was completely impossible. All he could see was Derrick pitching a fit, and the ever demonic *dragon lady* smiling a tiny triumphant smile that could never reach the scowl on her face. “I told you he was a snake, a sneaky green snake. Walking around here like a saint and thinking he can fool me. I always knew what he was capable of, what that thing between his legs was capable of.” That particular image was beaming in multicolor inside his head.

But there was still worst...

“What’re we going to do about it?” that was becoming Mabel’s song. It was a horrible song and he always wished she would forget about it.

“What’re we going to do about it? You know it’s getting big everyday?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m still thinking.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Look, I’m trying my best. I just don’t want to hurry and make a decision that would...”

She would chew her fingernails for a while, the darkness taking over her face, and then she would say in a quiet voice, “You’re not the one carrying it. You’re not the one with the pregnancy, with your belly growing big every day. I’m the one.” Then she would burst into hot tears, the tears running down her cheeks like twin rivers.

“What do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know, but do something.”

And then naturally he would try to console her, to calm her down. And it would always end in the same manner; the two of them in bed, she clutching him tightly onto her, her river of tears turning everything wet between them.

It was a routine; the song racking him for not making a decision fast enough, the tears flowing, the consoling that turned into lovemaking and the

shame and self-hate that came afterward. The pregnancy was like a magnet, a strong magnet that was always able to take him to her, always able to pull him to her even when he did not want to. He would've thought it would send him away (actually told himself that day after day), but instead he was now seeing her more frequently. It horrified him at times when he thought about it, but Niba was able to nod in understanding when he told him about the dilemma. "Things like that happen, man," Niba told him, "I understand that." Then he smiled, "Shit, I guess she's very happy having you around all the time like that."

Was she? He did not really think so, he knew with some certainty that she was only going to be happy when he had made a decision, when he had ended the uncertain waiting, cleared ever blurred line.

And are you ever going to do that?

I don't know, God I don't know.

"What've you decided to do about the pregnancy issue?" Niba asked. They were in the shop that afternoon. The shop was empty, Okoro having gone out to make some deliveries.

Jude shook his head, "Nothing yet."

"Shit, man, what're you waiting for?"

"It's not that easy."

"What's so difficult about making a decision?"

"You don't understand. It's not that easy."

"Jesus, man are you listening to yourself? What's wrong with you? You want to keep the baby? You want her to keep your baby?" Niba shook his head in wonderment.

Jude looked at the floor and shook his head. What did he really want? What did he really want to happen to the pregnancy, that pregnancy that was giving him sleepless nights? Well, that was simple enough wasn't it; all he wanted was for the pregnancy to cease existing, to disappear. But the issue was how was all that going to come about. He could not see how all that could just disappear on its own. It needed his...

You've to decide what you want, padre.

But it's not that easy.

Nothing's ever easy in this life.

You don't understand...it involves something I don't want to even think about.

Time's running out and you know that, padre.

And the damn thing was growing every day. It was like a malignant cancer, a malignant cancer that had already set a dateline when it was going to overwhelm its host, exploding everyday with new cells.

"You don't want her to have your baby, man, you don't want a dirty prostitute to have your baby," Niba delivered the verdict quietly.

Jude shook his head; he did not want such a thing to happen. After all, Mabel was just a dirty whore, a prostitute and there was no way he could allow her to keep the baby. There was not the slightest way on earth he could allow that to happen. He did not even think he wanted to have a child, no matter who the mother of that child was going to be. He was not yet ready for that step in his life. He shook his head again.

I don't want any of that.

"Good," Niba said in a conspiratory tone, "You remember what I told you the other day?"

He remembered well, but somehow he did not want to remember. It was bestial; it was worst than bestial, it was something he had never thought about without feeling his stomach grow cold. And it promptly grew cold as he watched the slow smile that looked particularly diabolic form on Niba's face. He wanted to turn away from that face, to run away from that face, covering his ears so as not to hear what was coming next.

"About my friend, my doctor friend..."

Jesus God!

Chapter Sixteen

It wasn't like he had made any decision; he told himself, when he walked up to his boss the next day. He was just trying to gather some nuts for the coming dry season and that was all. And the truth was that if somebody had asked him why he had decided to go see his boss, he would have simply blinked fast and stood there looking at that person with an open mouth and a tight tongue.

It's nothing!

But he was going to demand his salary from his boss, and when it was still two weeks to the end of the month. He was going to demand an advance pay and it was all for nothing (just gathering nuts for the dry season when there was still time). He wanted to believe it was just some reflex action controlling him, but somewhere deep inside he knew different. He had already started seeing...

What!?

"What!? It's still two weeks before the end of the month," the excessively fat man with the thick jowls that fell almost onto his shoulders like a bulldog's said looking up from the plate of roasted meat on the table before him. The man was his boss, and the only spectacular thing about the man that he knew was the size of his jowls and his ability to eat throughout the day.

"I've a problem," Jude whispered standing before the man and looking like a tiny louse that was going to be crushed at any moment.

"What kind of problem? Huh?" the man asked, picked up a piece of meat, looked at it with some admiration and then shove it into his mouth. "It's still too early to come here and ask me for your salary," he said chewing the meat, his thick jowls dancing like they were suddenly going to detach themselves and fall onto the floor, "If you want my advice I'll tell you this, it's not even early enough to start thinking about your salary before even coming here to ask for it."

It's my salary!

Jude felt the fuming start inside; couldn't the man see that it was something serious? Had he ever come before him to ask for his salary before

it was the end of the month? No, he had never done that, this was his first time and the man needed to see that it was absolutely necessary.

“I know it’s your salary and you feel you’ve the right to ask for it but,” the man shook his head, his hanging jowls sweeping to and fro, “I only pay when the month’s over.” The man promptly shoved another piece of meat into his mouth, a mouth that looked amazingly small compared to his thick face and those jowls.

“I’ll work till the end of the month,” Jude said hating the man sitting before him, “It’s not like I’m planning to quit work or runaway.”

“I didn’t say so.”

Then what’s your problem you fat pig? And how much’s the salary even?

“All I’m saying is that it’s not the end of the month and I pay you only when the month is over.”

Jude begged, practically going down on his knees before the man. Pleaded until the man looked up from his precious plate of roasted meat with a look of eternal satisfaction on his face and said, “Okay, I understand, but I can only have the money tomorrow. Go and come tomorrow.”

It was the next day, his prematurely paid salary safely in his hand, and the money that Derrick had given him for the recruitment exercise on top of it (after all using the money for the recruitment exercise would’ve been just another waste of time, just another senseless way to waste money, he reasoned), that the picture became clear. It was there before him, hanging there before him and painted in bright colors. He was staring at that picture, unable to turn away from it, staring at it as if it was the first time he had ever seen it but knowing that it had been there all along.

You just didn’t want to look at it.

But now he was looking at it, lying on his bed and listening to the constant screaming of the child, and only seeing that picture. There was a word on that bright picture, a word printed in bold capital letters, and he could see it too clearly.

Abortion! The word read.

Chapter Seventeen

Abortion!

That was the word, that word that was going to solve everything. But, he had never thought about it in a way that it would pertain to him, not in the least. He had never seen himself in the crossroad, imploring that word to guide him, to get him out. It had been something for the weak and the cowardly hearted, the lot who were filled with dread when the idea of taking responsibility for their action came about. So he had always believed, never having that nightmare of a dream that one day he would be in that category, that one day he would be...

Good God!

Abortion!?

It was horrible; it was completely inhuman and dirty. It was plain and defenseless murder, but that was the decision, the word he needed to say out loud. It was the decision that had been there in his mind, trapped inside some room covered with hypocrisy, knocking around the room and trying to find a way out. Finally, it was out, the door having been open for it. But...

What else was there for him to do? What other option was left for him in this world? God knew it was the last thing he wanted to be thinking about, the horrible sin he did not want to even dream of. But what could he do?

Nothing! There's no other option. You're at the crossroad and there's no other direction you can take but this one.

He was at a fix and there was only one door out of that fix, one logical door. And even if he hated the look of that door, even if it was dirty and bestial, there was nothing he could do about it.

It's the only option you have.

There was no way on earth he could allow Mabel to keep the pregnancy, not only because she was a sad eyed, plain face prostitute, but because doing that would be the wrong thing to do. He could feel it deep inside, it would be the gravest mistake he could ever make in his life, and God knew making her pregnant had been mistake enough. Letting her keep the child was a mistake that could not be made. A child was not just some toy anyone could go and buy from a toy shop. No, a child was a human being, a human being who

was going to need untold amounts of attention; a human being who was going to need a lot of financial support and sacrifice in order to grow up - a child who was going to need all the preparation (financial preparation), before even coming into this world, and not he nor Mabel could afford all that.

But it was still an awful decision to make.

I'm not capable of coming up with all what it'd need. I can't even take care of myself.

Talk to Derrick!

Jude wanted to laugh, that was the worst sounding joke he had ever heard. Talk to Derrick? What was that going to change? Derrick had his own issues, and...

I'm already enough burden as it is.

You've a job...

What job? How much was he paid in a month? What could fifteen thousand francs do to him before even talking about a child who was bound to have so many needs and a lot of uncertainties? It was a cruel joke.

The truth was that he had nothing, not even prospects for the future. His life itself was a fix and he did not know when it was going to unfix itself. So, the only logic was for the pregnancy to go, to simply disappear, even if he was going to sacrifice so much. He was going to do the unborn child (who was still just a clump of blood and misshaped tissues anyway) a great favor actually. He was saving the child from potential disaster, for attempting to bring that child to the world was nothing but a potential disaster. It was nothing but trying to create another human being like him or worse, a human being who will hate him all its life on earth.

And that was a sin!

Yes, bringing a child into this world, a child you could not care for was one of the biggest sins on earth. It was a sin that was worse than terminating that child's yet to begin life.

My parents should've thought that way about me; it would've solved a lot of problems...

He found himself outside without consciously knowing where he was going. He felt like a puppet, a puppet who had no feelings, a puppet that was led around by a purposeful puppeteer. His invisible puppeteer led him to a

phone booth. It was when he grabbed the phone that the shaking and heart pounding started.

Niba answered on the fifth ring.

“Hello?”

“It’s me,” he said in a shaky voice.

“Man, do you’ve a watch?”

“I know it’s late...”

It was around 10pm already.

“It’s not only late, I’m working, trying to make some hot bucks.”

Niba was working as he called it, pounding on some computer keyboard in some cyber café and trying to lure some fool into his trap. Most of his scamming work was done in the late hours of the night, when it was possible to hook up with white folks who were enjoying daylight and going about with their businesses in their own parts of the world.

“What do you want, man? I’ve this junk that’s showing a lot of interest and I don’t want to lose him. What do you want? Has your brother chased you out of his house?”

“No, not that...”

“Then what’s chasing you?”

“It’s nothing really. It’s just that...”

Jude told him about what he had decided, his voice sounding completely shaky even to him.

“Finally,” he heard Niba say after he had finished, “Now your brain’s working properly.”

“When can it be possible?”

“Do you’ve the cash already?”

“Yes.”

Niba was silent for a while, and then he said, “I’ll call my doctor friend tomorrow in the morning and see when he can do it.”

“Okay.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes.”

“Then now let me hustle some hot bucks, I’m completely broke and I hate being broke.”

Jude stood for a while in silence, griping the phone in his hand, still holding it over his ear even when Niba was already disconnected at the other end of the line. He felt suddenly light-headed, felt suddenly like there was nothing left inside him, like he was just filled with hollowness.

He wanted only to sit down, to just sit down and maybe coil up in a ball and sleep...and simply cease existing.

Chapter Eighteen

“How’s she? Is she okay?” Jude asked getting up from the chair he was sitting on, when the doctor walked into the office. They were in the doctor’s office, having been waiting for more than an hour.

The doctor smiled at him, “She is fine, calm down.”

“Can I see her?”

“No, not yet.”

“But it’s finish, isn’t it? You’ve finish?”

The doctor shook his head, “Not yet.”

The doctor smiled at him, a smile that said he was used to people like him, anxious young people whom he had to listen to patiently and answer all their questions and try to calm them down. Anxious young people like him who were silly enough to have fallen into the trap of pregnancy and who were always knocking at the door of his clinic, begging for him to correct their mistakes.

“Everything will be fine, my friend,” the doctor said with the smile still on his face, “Do not worry yourself for nothing, she is in good hands. Is that not so, Niba?”

“Yes, everything will be fine,” Niba concurred from beside Jude. He patted Jude and pulled him back to his chair, “If he says everything will be fine, then everything will be fine.”

Jude sat quietly. He wanted to know the true story about how Niba had known the man standing before them, the calm reassuring man before them wearing a laboratory jacket that seemed to have been tailored for him by a fashion designer. It was possible that Niba had brought a girl here, a girl who had needed some help chopping out a fetus out of her womb; a fetus that was Niba’s responsibility. It was possible because that was something that Niba would do without even waving a finger.

“How did you know he was doing it?” he had asked Niba yesterday when Niba had come to see him and confirm the appointment.

“Come on, man, don’t be naïve,” Niba had laughed, “Where do you think all the little doctors running all their little clinics get money from?”

“They treat patients.”

“Yes, but the question is how many patients. That’s the big question.”

Jude shrugged; he had always believed that private clinics were for rich patients who were rich enough to find the government hospitals disgusting. The type that needed attention that was not always given in government hospitals where nobody cared about their duty but only about the monthly reward that duty entitled them to. To him that was the reason for all the private clinics dotting the whole town, but Niba was willing to give him the real reason for their existence.

“They’re just little slaughter houses, all these clinics you see around town. That’s how they manage to get their money. When you see all the doctors driving their Mercedes cars around and throwing dough around, know that they get all that money from abortion,” Niba smiled, “I’m sure they even pray every day for a girl to get pregnant.”

“Jesus!”

“Yes, and it’s a very lucrative business, man. A very lucrative business. Just imagine, in a day a doctor can get about three pregnant girls with handy money...”

“Three?”

“Don’t look so surprised, that’s just an average. Just imagine it, three girls with money begging him to clean out their wombs for them. You know how much money that can be daily?” Niba shook his head and whistled, a light in his eyes that looked like he could already see the money lying there in his hand, “Just imagine that, man, all that money and all the silly girls...” he smiled a diabolic smile, “Silly girls who’d even want to sleep with you if you want to afterwards, you know. It’s too easy, man, especially once you’ve seen their ugly vaginas and even touched them.”

The money part, he could understand, but the girls with their ugly vaginas part following the doctor around and ready to spread their legs for him he did not understand. But, Niba was someone who was well informed in that field, so it was probably not totally false.

“You know what I’d like, man? I’d like to be a doctor too, in fact if I was not already totally useless I’d have tried to be one. Build me a little clinic, make all the money I can make and sleep with all the silly girls.”

The doctor opened a drawer at his desk and searched inside for a while before bringing out an object that Jude was not able to see. “Voila,” the doctor said, “This is what I was looking for.”

He turned away pocketing the object in one of his jacket pockets and smiled at them, “Do not worry, nothing bad is going to happen. I’m a doctor for God’s sake.” He winked at Jude mischievously before walking out of the office.

It was as he was walking out that Jude saw the tiny blood stains on his jacket. They were just a few of them, but they were enough to bring out that image again;

Blood! Thick drops of blood!

That was the image he had started seeing since the beginning of that evening, from the moment they had walked into the doctor’s office. It was an image he could not shake off; thick drops of blood dropping steadily on a tiled floor, a white tiled floor. The thick drops of blood were dripping on the floor and forming a pool; a pool that started small and then grew bigger and bigger.

He did not know how the abortion was being carried out or what particular room in the clinic (call it a theater or whatever), or what that room was supposed to look like, but the image was there. It had another twist to it now that he had seen those tiny blood stains on the doctor’s jacket. Now in the image, there was a doctor (not even the one doing the abortion or close to a lookalike), a diabolic looking doctor wearing a surgical mask and smiling behind that mask, smiling a diabolic smile that could not be hidden by the surgical mask. That doctor was standing between two well spread female legs (legs that even in the image he knew belonged to Mabel even if he did not want to acknowledge it), and holding an ugly looking bloody scissors in his gloved hand. A stream of blood was flowing from somewhere up between those parted legs and dropping steadily on the white tiled floor. And it was soon turning into a river of blood not just a stream, covering the floor with a big pool of...

Jude shuddered suddenly feeling his body go cold.

“Hey, you alright?” Niba asked noticing the shudder.

“Yes, I think so.”

The man who called himself a doctor was just a butcher, a butcher working in his slaughter house and enjoying it. And the sad thing was that he was paying the butcher to do it, to enjoy his sadistic work. He was paying the man with all his salary, and not only his salary but with money that might've changed his future (*that's a cruel joke and you know it*). He had sacrificed a lot to give the butcher his satisfaction.

"How much will it cost?" he had asked Niba.

"Let me see..." Niba thought for a while, "How many months?"

"What?"

"The pregnancy, how old is it?"

"Two months and a week, I think."

"Then that'd be thirty."

"Jesus!"

"It's a doctor we're going to see, not some quack."

"I've only twenty-five and I don't see where I can get more right now, that's the problem."

Niba gave him a pat on the back, "Don't worry, man, I know the man personally, we can work something out."

And what had the man said, the satisfied butcher, "I am accepting this only because of you, Niba, just because he is your friend."

"All finish," the doctor announced with a flourish the next time he walked into his office. He had already taken off his jacket, but the smile was still there as he took his seat behind his desk, "And she is actually fine," he said.

"You're sure?"

"He is asking me if I am sure," the doctor laughed.

"Can I see her now?" Jude asked.

"Why not? There is no harm in seeing her. She is only resting."

She was in one of the wards, one of the private ones that had been designed for people who were actually sick. And when Jude stood to go, the doctor mentioned for him to wait and took a pad from his table and wrote something on it, then handed it to him, "Just some drugs you will need to buy for her. And do not forget to buy them, I do not want you bringing her here because of some little infection."

"I won't forget."

“And do not try to use my ward as a hotel room.”

Jude felt his stomach go cold as the man laughed at his own sick joke, Niba joining in.

Chapter Nineteen

She was lying on her back on a bed that was small even for somebody like her. She was staring up at the ceiling, her hands behind her head. But the first thing he noticed was her eyes staring up at the ceiling. They had a new quality of sadness about them, and they did not even turn towards him to acknowledge his presence as he entered the ward. She just lay there, like a log of wood that was never going to move again but for the occasional blinking of her eyes.

Jude felt his mouth go dry as he stood there trying to look at her and mostly just staring at the floor. He did not know what to say, could not even bear to ask her if she was okay. He felt a cold hand of guilt on his face, tasting the texture of his skin. It was his fault, his fault that she was now lying there in this clinic, his fault that the butcher had worked on her.

But what else was left him?

And she had accepted to come.

It was still his fault, even if his brain tried to rationalize that it was both their fault, that she too had played a part in all this. That was just a lie his brain wanted to believe, just to keep him safe. It was his decision and nobody else's decision that had brought her into this clinic to see the butcher. It was his decision that had turned them into heartless murderers, heartless murderers who had taken the life of a poor innocent child.

(Just clumps of blood and tissue).

And somehow, he knew she was blaming him for it, blaming him for the fact that she was now a murderer; that she was now going to spend her everyday thinking about that heartless murder she had been part of. He could sense her invisible accusing fingers pointing at him, fingers that were cold like ice if they could touch him.

Jude felt beads of sweat start to form all over his body. It was like his pores wanted to open and let out some of the guilt he was feeling.

"I want to go back to my place," she said suddenly still staring at the ceiling.

"But you're...are you sure?" Jude said, his voice betraying him.

“I want to go back to my place,” she repeated like a robot with some string behind her back that had to be pulled before she could spill out its preprogrammed words.

“But you’ve not rested...and you...”

“I don’t want to lie here, I want to go back to my place.”

Suddenly, he wanted nothing than to leave that ward, leave her lying there and just go and never look back.

The same feeling returned in full this time when he was with her in her murky smelling room. All he wanted to do was walk out of the room, runaway and never set his feet in that room again. She was now lying on her bed, still lying on her back and staring up at the ceiling. That feeling was the only real thing he could feel as he told her he needed to head home. She only nodded, not even looking at him as he walked out of her room.

And out of her life!

Yes and out of her life, that was all he wanted. And that night he made a vow again, that he was never going to fall in her trap again. And this time he prayed, prayed to God to help him keep that vow.

And he believed God had heard his prayer as he fell to sleep that night, the ceaseless screaming of the child temporally blocked out of his head.

Chapter Twenty

Forgetting is one of the greatest properties God handed down to mankind. Though in most instances it is a curse that no one wants to be part of, but there are still those rare times when that curse is a cherished gift. It is a gift that promotes healing, healing even from the most heinous acts. But it can still just be an illusion, for even when the feeling that the events are all forgotten becomes overwhelming, there is still that tiny bit of remnant locked somewhere in the subconscious mind, sleeping quietly and waiting for a time to leap out again someday like a jack from the box.

Like everybody else who had roamed God's earth and who still roamed and will continue roaming, Jude embraced the forgetting process with all the enthusiasm he could muster. It was like peeling layers off an onion, peeling them off and throwing them into the dump. It was a slow process, hour after hour, day after day and week after week, but the process was moving on and at the end all that was left was that tiny innermost layer, the remnant that could be stored in the subconscious mind to sleep.

It was logical, the forgetting part, for what was there to be gained from remembering? Nothing, that was the truth. It was the best way he could handle things, the abortion and Mabel herself, just layers of the same onion that needed to go down the drain.

"Life goes on, man," Niba told him one evening after the abortion, when he was still pretty down, still feeling the grip of that cold hand of guilt, "You did what was necessary, that's all. You don't have to let it disturb you and worse when you know you can't change anything."

Life goes on and there was nothing to do, but forget.

Before the month was over, he was back to his usual old self, dreaming his big dreams and hating the world for not giving him a chance to make them possible...

"I'd really like to go back to school," he told Niba one evening. They were in their favorite bar, sitting over bottles of beer, getting drunk and Niba paying with his ill gotten money as usual.

"Man, you're crazy. School?" Niba shook his head.

"I'm serious. That's all I want to do."

“Shit!” Niba laughed, “That’s always the problem with you, you’re always serious about stupid things.”

“Wishing to go back to school and get a master’s degree is not stupid.”

“What for?”

“Huh?”

“What do you want a master’s degree for? You already have a bachelor’s degree.”

Jude nodded; it always amazed him the way Niba had chosen to be a self-proclaimed education hater. There was no way he could make Niba understand that life was not only about drinking beer every evening and going to sleep and getting up and wishing for more beer and going out and looking for a means to satisfy that thirst. Niba could not see the fact that there was a world out there, a world that needed to be conquered, a world that needed to be studied and a world that he Jude could give anything to be part of. It was beyond Niba’s grasp, the concept about a real life; and when he would’ve had every financial support he needed for that race. It was one of those typical ironies in life, where there was someone like Niba being fed with a silver spoon when he did not want to eat anything, not even the tiny scraps, and while there was someone like him who only wanted a wooden spoon to eat with and not even able to have that wooden spoon.

“You’ve a degree, right?” Niba asked after taking a long pull from his bottle. Jude noted that his eyes were already going red, the beer working its magic as always.

“Yes, I do,” Jude nodded knowing what was coming next.

“And what’s that degree doing to you? Nothing. So why waste your precious time again to go and get more?”

A lot of reasons you can’t understand.

A bachelor’s degree was useless in Cameroon, not even if it was a good one with high grades. There was no one ready to employ a degree holder, so the only option left was to aim for higher, to get to the highest possible level that could be attained and increase the chances of getting a proper job.

“What do you want to become, man?” Niba was still saying, “A broke professor? Drive around in some broke looking car and complain about everything in this world?”

“I don’t know,” Jude smiled, “And you almost sound like my brother now.”

“Your brain’s filled with worms.”

They laughed and sat in silence for a while.

“It’s just that I don’t have the money,” Jude said quietly.

“Money for what?”

“The school thing.”

“But your brother’s a teacher...”

“Yes, and he has a family now and his own problems.” *And he can’t even understand what I want out of life and why I should bother myself with school either.*

“Then just scam a little and go back to school.” Niba offered with a laugh.

“What!?” Jude said sitting up.

He had his position when it came to scamming and Niba knew that. But...

“I said just scam a little and go back to school. There’re a lot of junks waiting to give money to you if you just ask them.”

Jude shook his head.

“Oh come on, it’s not that bad. It’s just hustling some easy bucks, man, not killing people. ”

It was a nasty way to make money, lying to some poor people online and taking their hard earned money. And Jude wanted nothing to do with something like that. He wanted to go back to school with all his heart, but he wanted to do so using money that was gotten through the proper channels, not from scamming some innocent people.

“It’s not moral,” Jude said.

“What has moral got to do with making money?” Niba laughed.

“It’s not still right,” Jude said shaking his head.

And I’m not you.

“Right? What’s right? We’re talking about making some bucks here not what’s wrong or right.” Niba looked at him as he was shaking his head, “Let me ask you a question; was slavery right? Slave trade, was it right?”

Jude shook his head.

“Was colonization right? No, but the white man did it all without any problem and they’re rich today because of that.”

“You can’t...”

Niba raised a hand to cut him off, “It was all wrong, but that’s the way of the world and there’s nothing we can do about it. And now we’ve discovered a way to start making them pay us back. Listen, man, the white man is rich because of us, Africa. We’re just trying to take some of our money back, and it’s not even much, just chicken change.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Absolutely,” Niba laughed.

After a while, Jude shook his head and said, “It’s still dirty money.”

“Oh, have you seen clean money before? There is nothing as clean money on earth, man, when you see it you let me know.” Niba laughed, “Money has no color.”

“So, how’s Mabel these days?” Niba asked after a while, changing the topic.

“Who?”

“Mabel, at least you remember her. How’s she?”

Jude shrugged, “I don’t know.”

“What’s the meaning of that?”

“I just told you I don’t know.”

“You don’t see her again?”

“Something like that.”

“That’s bad,” Niba laughed.

Jude shrugged.

“She’ll really hate you now.”

Jude shrugged again. He did not want to talk about her or about anything that had to do with her.

I’m trying to forget, can’t you see that?

“I don’t care,” Jude said, “Can we talk about something else?”

“Okay.”

Chapter Twenty-one

One day, Okoro started talking about his mysterious friend with the big shiny car again. It was on a clear and bright morning in the middle of March; the rainy season having made its graceful entrance, making the ugly dust varnish from every tree leaf and every roof top.

Jude walked into the shop a little late that morning to find Okoro smiling from ear to ear, fidgeting and itching to let loose with his mouth again.

“What’s it?” Jude asked without looking at him.

“Just guess,” Okoro said.

“What should I guess?”

“Just guess,” Okoro said again the words spilling out of his mouth as if they were already hurting his throat.

Jude was behind his counter arranging things for the day’s business to start.

“Just guess who was here this morning.”

Jude glanced up at Okoro and said nothing. At times it was best to just let the fool ramble without encouraging him.

“He was here again today,” Okoro said finally.

Who was here again today?

Jude still said nothing.

“Your friend, your friend with the big shiny car, he was here just a few minutes ago. You just missed him by...” Okoro showed him the tip of his index finger to indicate the time. “I wanted to ask his number, I was actually about asking for his number when he received a call and left. He looks like a very busy man.”

Jude said nothing, a man who wanted to see him that bad and who had a big shiny car was something he could not still understand. There was no one he knew of, no face, not from any of his past lives that could match that picture.

“He said something this time,” Okoro was still saying, “I don’t know if it’s true,” there was that look of total disbelief in his eyes again, “But he said you stayed with him in the same house in the university. I can’t believe that.”

A smile stole Okoro's face as he shook his head not able to believe that even when he was repeating it from his own mouth.

Somebody he had stayed within the same hostel in Buea with him? What was that, a joke?

It was a joke, yes definitely a joke. It was just like listening to someone tell you that a cripple you once knew, a cripple who had no legs to talk of, was now healed and walking around and not only just walking but running marathons and winning. It was absurd, absurd because he knew with certainty that there was no one from that hostel (if you had guts enough to call it that) in Buea who was now driving around town and asking after him. It was impossible, even more than impossible.

They had been just a bunch of lowlifes, a bunch of penniless hopeless students who had found themselves staying in the remaining dilapidated structure, surrounded by tall and impressive structures, that could accommodate their type. They had been staying in a dilapidating plank structure that only someone with a belly full of guts could've called a house talk less a hostel (Derrick had only had enough to spare on his tuition fee not enough to put him in a decent hostel), a structure that was so full of holes (some of them were even big enough for a small person to pass through), you could see what pitiful belongings anybody owned from a hundred meters away. He had stayed in that structure for three years with a bunch of lowlifes like him, some of them who were even worse than him in that they were not always able to even pay the landlord his meager rents in the stipulated time. He had stayed in that structure with a bunch of lowlifes like him who were not even able to eat a meal in a day. And now Okoro was telling him that somehow one of them was out here driving a big shiny car and asking around for him. That was absurd.

Completely impossible!

Or could it be someone from the privileged class? He asked himself just out of desperation. The privileged class had been made up of people who had been staying in better hostel, in luxurious hostels. The class that could not look at their own dilapidating structure without wrinkling their noses and giggling in awe like girls. And he had not had anybody from that class up in the sky that he could think of as a friend or anything close to that. *There was nobody from that class of royalties who could even remember his face talk less his name. It*

was all impossible and more so when Okoro was trying to insinuate that somebody from his gang of lowlifes was now a royalty...

"You don't believe that idiot, do you?" Niba had asked him when he had told him about his mysterious friend with the big car that was always coming to look for him when he was out of the shop.

"Okoro can be an idiot at times, but this one looks like..."

"Oh, forget that fool," Niba waved it away, "Do you know anybody who drives a car?"

"No but..."

"And if someone like that was in town, let's just say that there's actually a person like that, don't you think you'd have met him already?"

"Well, he's been trying to meet me..."

"Yes, and he can't even tell Okoro his name?"

"He did and Okoro forgot..."

"Or his number?"

Jude shrugged.

"Forget it man, that fool's just trying to work your brain for nothing..."

But he could not just forget it. Even as absurd as it sounded to him, he was certain that there was someone out there.

Someone who knew him somehow.

It was only after he had received his first client of the day that Okoro came to him again still fidgeting and itching to ramble some more.

"I forgot something very important," he said.

Jude looked up from his notebook.

"He said he'd pass again this afternoon, that you should not leave the shop."

Chapter Twenty-two

It was a slow day, the slowest he could ever remember. It was as if the hand of the clock was frozen in one place. But he knew time was something that could not be frozen in one place. It was just the anxiety inside and the aspect of waiting that was giving him that feeling.

The anxiety always came with the waiting; and worse when it was for someone he could not even start picturing. It was like waiting for the unknown, waiting for a mysterious friend who was beyond anything he could think of. And he kept asking himself why the mysterious man was even bothering to see him. It was something he could not understand. Was the man coming simply to see how useless he was? To mock him for working as a sales boy in a shop after three years of university studies? That was very likely the reason, he told himself waiting for the slow hand of the clock to turn and bring the afternoon. But it was not always the case, he wanted to believe, there were genuine friends who actually cared, a genuine friend who just wanted to see him after all these years, to see him and talk about the old days...

And still the anxiety was growing, that anticipation to finally see the mysterious friend. Before noon, the anxiety and anticipation was already torture, torture that had him looking up with anxiety at every face that walked into the shop waiting for that declaration, looking up with anticipation at every car that stopped outside. He started to hate that anxiety and anticipation, started to hate that faceless mysterious friend that was torturing him by making him wait. He even found himself hating Okoro for not simply keeping everything to himself and not informing him.

"He'll come," Okoro said from time to time, even as the day drew to a close slowly, "He'll come and I know it, no matter what."

"Can you just shut up and leave me alone?"

It was around evening that day, the sun already down behind the hills and the tall buildings that were now popping around town, when he was already preparing to leave the shop that a big shiny Toyota Camry (the 2009 model) pulled to a stop outside the shop. Jude did not even look up at the car this time; he was already tired of looking up every time a car stopped outside the

shop. He did not see the man getting out of the car then, as he was bent over his notebook going through all the sales for the day and trying to make sure everything was okay, his mind already gotten over the issue of the mysterious friend. He even already believed it had all been a joke; a joke played on him by Okoro, and was already planning a way to pay Okoro back for playing that joke on him.

Jude turned to lock up his notebook in the cabinet behind him without noticing the look of excitement that had taken over Okoro's face as the man from the car walked into the shop. He did not even hear the excited whispers coming out of Okoro's mouth, "It's him, it's him..."

It was when he turned from the cabinet that he saw the man. The man was standing before his counter a smile on his face. The first thing he saw was the smile. It was a smile that was very familiar, but it looked completely out of place on the face before him. It was a mistake, a horrible mistake, he thought staring at that smiling face before him. It was just like one of those dreams that could never be remembered because they tend to dissolve in a second when sleep drifted away. Something that was not supposed to happen in real life. Jude opened his mouth...

"It's me," the man before him said in a voice that was almost familiar, just like the smile.

"Eric," Jude whispered, not able to hide the look of surprise and total disbelief on his face.

Chapter Twenty-three

“Eric!” Jude gasped again.

The man before him had that smile he remembered so well, that once upon a time humble and honest smile that could defy any logic.

“What happened to you?!” Jude whispered not able to take his eyes off the man standing before him or to hide the disbelief he felt. This was totally insane, totally something that was not happening.

It was a mirage that was going to pass.

This is not happening; he's not the one standing here before me. No way.

“What happened to you?” Jude asked again, he wanted to touch the man to know he was actually there before him, actually real and not some mirage that was going to disappear when he drew close to it.

“How do you mean?” the man said with that smile still on his face. It was a smile he had known, a smile he could still remember even after four whole years. The only problem was that the smile was on the wrong face, on a face that he did not know, a face he had never seen. This was somebody he knew nothing about, this person standing before him. Just that smile...

“I mean, you're...you've...I don't know,” Jude said trying to smile but only letting another nervous smile sketch his face. This was impossible and he knew it, impossible but he was here before him. “I don't even know how I can say this,” Jude started again, “You've...”

“I've changed?”

“No,” Jude shook his head, “Not even that.”

Once upon a time, he had known a young man who had had that familiar smile, a young man who went by the name Eric. That had been about four years ago, back in his university days. Back then they had all been staying in the same dilapidated structure, that embodiment of poverty, with a whole bunch of others, and having only one thing in common; the fact that they had all been lowlifes, all poverty ridden young men with dreams that they knew were definitely hopeless. And that young man, Eric, in particular had been a capital lowlife, the honest type who found nothing wrong with simply bowing to his condition and with a gentle and humble smile that was always

infectious. Eric had been that lowlife alright, that lowlife who had won the price for the best lowlife, a lowlife who had been able to distinguish himself among other lowlives as the lowlife of the era.

“There’s nothing I can do,” he was fun of saying; “My mother’s trying her best.” And she had had six other children to take care of back wherever home was for them. Seven children who had all been blessed with no sharing a father, each one having his or her own father that was never one day going to come out in the open and present himself. Eric was the first child in that whole mixture of strange genes and had to work hard every vacation to be able to come back to school the next semester and to help support his fertile mother’s endeavors. He always came to school with just the tuition fee, ending up living at the mercy of the bunch of lowlives. And Jude had been his prime target....

But here, standing before him, fattened like a Friesian cow ready to start spilling out buckets full of milk was that same Eric. He was now a sophisticated wealthy man who looked like he had known nothing but wealth all his life.

Had he been lying to all of them back then? Jude wondered not even able to believe that concept. There was no one who could’ve accepted to pass through what Eric had passed through back then just for the fun of it.

He looked like a government minister, Jude heard Okoro’s words in his head again.

It was impossible! Purely unbelievable! The man standing before him was not the humble and always gentle fellow but a man with the air of the rich. That sophisticated air that always repelled the poor faster than anything. It was completely out of sync with reality, one of those miracles that not even a dedicated priest would have believed possible. For it was a total and complete change.

It’s completely impossible!

“I can’t believe this,” Jude whispered, still staring at the strange apparition before him, his mouth still hanging open, “I just can’t believe it”.

“What really happened to you?”

They were now sitting over some bottles of beer in a bar Jude had never entered or even dreamt of one day doing so. It was a classy type, for the sophisticatedly rich. He could feel the discomfort taking hold of him; it was

like every eye in the bar was staring at him, staring at him because he did not belong there. And truly he did not belong, but here he was sitting over beers that he could not even start to guess the price, sitting here with Eric (the new altered Eric), who was rich enough to complain about how cheap the beer was here.

“You need to drink in some places,” Eric had told him when he had opened his mouth to protest. That was the new and altered Eric, the Eric who was now driving a big car and who did not even think that car was something big, “This is no car,” he had told him while they were leaving the shop, “I’ve another car, a Prado, I don’t like this one that much.” That was the sort of thing Jude expected to hear from some government minister or some director; the people who had the country’s wealth in their pockets. It was not something that he would’ve expected to hear from someone he had known four years ago, someone who had been surviving daily by eating from his own porous pockets, someone who had been penniless enough to qualify that word.

What’s happening here? Who’s this man sitting across from me? Did he actually know the man?

No! It’s impossible!

Jude shook his head in wonder, “What happened to you?”

Eric shrugged and took a sip of his beer, picking up the glass before him with delicate looking hands that Jude did not fail to notice. It was like a rebirth, like Eric had been reborn and was now somebody else, somebody that Jude knew nothing about.

This is impossible!

And the man was completely changed, not just the rich air or the wealth hanging from his every pore, but he was completely different and suddenly Jude could not fail seeing how hollow the smile was now, or how hollow his voice sounded. It was like listening to a poorly recorded cassette that had stayed for a decade lying in the dust, a recording that had sounded okay when it was being done but that now sounded completely faked and dull.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Eric asked with a recorded smile.

Jude shook his head, this was absolutely and completely impossible.

“Are you alright?”

Jude nodded.

Eric laughed, “You don’t look like you’re alright though. You look like you’ve seen a ghost and the only person sitting here is me, your old friend.”

“I’m just wondering how this happened, how you became so...”

“Rich?”

Jude nodded, “Yes, how you became so rich.”

“I’m not rich.”

Jude shook his head.

“I’m just managing.”

“You don’t look like anybody who’s just managing that I know,” Jude said.

Eric laughed, his laughter coming out as hollow as his smile, just like an old recording, just like somehow some powerful force had been able to take a completely different human being and embed some voice that had once belonged to someone else, someone he had known four years back.

“Jesus, stop looking at me like that,” Eric said, “I’m still the old Eric you knew, not some alien from outer space.”

That was as hard to believe as it would be if one morning someone knocked at the door and informed you that he was the resurrected Christ already here on earth for the second-coming.

“How did you do it?” Jude asked again.

“I told you I’m not rich.” Eric said smiled and looked down at his beer a little seriousness stealing over his face, and then he said in a quiet voice, “I’m just lucky, that’s all.”

If the word luck actually existed in real life, then this was its biggest manifestation. The biggest manifestation that had been able to transform the Eric he had known into this sophisticated new and altered Eric sitting across from him. The Eric who had had his pair of jean trousers that had looked like they had been made from elastic fibers, and always humble and even funny while people picked on him about his elastic jean trousers...

“Say, where did you buy your trouser, Eric?”

“From the shop.”

“Which shop?”

“Where they sell trousers.”

That would crack everybody, Eric joining in naturally without any sign of anger.

“Seriously, where did you buy it?”

“From the shop, I told you.”

“Okay, how much did you buy it?”

“Two hundred francs.”

“From a shop?”

“Yes, from a shop.”

Then another uproar...

That was the Eric who had been completely transformed by luck, and was now sitting across from him.

It was...

“...it’s business, nothing else,” Eric was explaining to him, sounding more and more like a poor recording as he spoke, “I got lucky with a few deals that’s all.”

Eric’s cell phone rang and he answered it, talked for a while with someone at the other end, Jude only catching a few numbers from the conversation that sounded like it was all about money. “Business,” Eric said after dropping the call, “It can’t let you rest.” He smiled at Jude, “Excuse me it’s a business partner and he wants me to arrange some shipments for him.”

Jude tried an understanding smile and it came out almost all wrong.

“As I was telling you, business has been good to me, and well I think I know how to keep money too and I’ve learned the ropes fast enough and have a sharp mind too. That’s all,” Eric said, took a drink and said, “And I’ve been lucky too.”

Chapter Twenty-four

It was an explanation and it was simple even if it sounded hollow and recorded. He did not know why the explanation sounded that way.

It's because you expected something else, something more difficult to believe.

Yes, that was the issue; he had been expecting to hear something out of this world, some story that was going to sound completely bogus. A lottery ticket winning story perhaps, or Eric finding some hidden diamond or gold. Not some simple story about doing business and getting lucky, which was strangely a simply straight forward story.

"It's really so simple, at times I don't believe it myself," Eric was saying.

Luck had played a part, a big part. In fact it was a miracle, a miracle that had propelled a lowlife into something else. What Jude could not believe was the fact that that lowlife was Eric...

After graduating, Eric had decided to embark on business, any business, "There was nothing else I could do, no jobs." He had slaved himself around with his mother and started a tiny miserable business, "It was just a small thing, a small shop where I could sell a few things that people around needed. I had just wanted something that could help my family in one way or the other." Jude could imagine that, a tiny shop somewhere in a small village selling all the tiny silly things you could dream of, the type of tiny silly things that could not actually yield any profits. "I always wanted to do business even back then in the university, I had always believed I had the gift to turn money around, the problem was just getting enough capital to get started." And he had gotten a capital, even if it was just a small one, to start with.

"It was pretty difficult in the beginning, you know when I couldn't even see the capital or the money I was making but I had to take care of people and to keep the business growing." But even with the beginning difficult and all, Eric had had a sharp eye for business and the brains to learn the ropes. "I started feeling confident, that I could do anything." And then he had put in everything the family owned as collateral and had asked for a business loan. "I was shivering when they gave me the money. Everybody thought I was making a mistake, taking a great risk and all that, but I knew I was going to do something with the money. People always try to prevent you from taking

the big leap in life.” He had in less than a year repaid that loan and taken another, “I was now spreading, putting my hand on any business venture I saw fit.” And in less than a year he had repaid the other loan, “I now had enough capital.” He had started selling car spare parts and a lot of other stuff, a business that was lucrative when you knew what to do about it, “In less than a year I was able to start importing my own containers.”

Eric took a sip of his beer and looked at him, “You’re not drinking.”

Jude took a drink and smiled at him.

“Now I’m expanding and people say I’m rich,” he shrugged, “I don’t think so yet.”

“You’re rich.”

“Anyway, I think what happened to me is because I wasn’t afraid of taking the risk,” Eric said, “And I was very lucky that nothing bad happened to disrupt my plans, I still shiver when I think about the time I was handed my first business loan.” He laughed a nervous laugh, “You can’t imagine the type of things that went through my head holding that money in my hand and knowing that it was all my life and not only my life even that I was holding in my hand.”

They sat in silence for a while.

“It’s a miracle.”

Eric nodded, “Yes, I think God has been by my side all along.”

“So, what about you? How’re things working out for you?”

Jude shrugged and tried another smile, “Nothing great, I’m just managing.”

“You’re existing,” Eric laughed.

“Yes, existing,” Jude smiled; the first normal smile since Eric had walked into the shop that evening, “God you still remember that one.”

“I can never forget.”

“Existing” had been one of their things back then in their poverty shack. It had been one of those words that you could not even trace the origin. Nobody had been ready to accept the crown for bringing that one around; it had just popped out of nowhere one day and they had started using it. The rich kids had been “living” life, and they in the poverty shack had been “existing”.

It sounded faraway thinking about that time now, faraway like it had been centuries ago.

Jude shook his head, “Existing, I think I’m still existing.”

Here was someone who was no longer existing; someone who had finally found his destiny, sitting across from him.

“How did you even know I was here in Bamenda all this time?” Jude asked.

“I didn’t.”

“Then how...?”

“Walters.”

“Who?”

“Walters, you remember him don’t you? Short Walters and his loud mouth? The loudest mouth in the world?”

He remembered Walters, God how could anybody ever forget Walters once you heard him talk just once? Walters had been the shortest, smallest and loudest person in their poverty shack, a tiny young man who looked like he was just 12; who was always ready to argue with, and insult anybody who was willing to have a word or two with him. “It’s because of his size; he’s too short and small, all he wants is to be noticed, that’s all.” Those had been the words to describe Walters.

“God, how’s he?” Jude asked, remembering that tiny young man with the loudest mouth. He could not help smiling.

“Not bad, he’s still short,” Eric said; and still the poor and loud mouthed Walters, his eyes said. “I saw him two months ago in Douala and he told me you were in Bamenda, that he had heard you were working in a shop.”

It’s not work!

“I was trying to clear some goods from the port.”

“What was he doing there?” The world was such a small place, amazingly small that no one could hide anywhere forever.

Eric shrugged, “I don’t honestly know,” he laughed, “He was carrying a big briefcase around though, told me he was now working with a lawyer (*Which you doubt*). He did law back in the university, right? Yeah, I saw him with a big briefcase that was bigger than him, and he was wearing this suit, you should’ve seen it, an oversized suit reaching below his knees, God he looked funny as always.”

I'm not alone, Jude thought, I'm not the only one still in the grasp of poverty.

"Before I could say a word or two he was already telling me about a woman he was having a relationship with, an important worker in the port and that he could help me clear my goods without any problem." Eric shook his head and laughed, "Walters, he'll never change."

"That'll only happen when this present world has ended."

"Drink up and ask for more," Eric said after a while, when they had exhausted the old days.

"I think I'm okay, this one's going to be enough," Jude said and took a sip of his third beer of the evening, making a mental calculation of how much money Eric was going to pay for all the beers and almost shuddering. He could feel that guilt, the one that always came when he was at the receiving end; and worse when he knew there was nothing the man at the giving end could gain from him.

"Come on, three bottles of beer and you're already trying to tell me it's enough?"

"I'm..."

Eric shook his head at him, "We're going to drink, for old time's sake."

"But this bar's too expensive."

"I already told you this is nothing, it's one of the cheapest places I've drunk in in a while."

Chapter Twenty-five

That night Jude lay in bed on his back staring up at the ceiling unable to go to sleep. He still could not believe the events of the day, that he had spent the evening with Eric, the poor humble fellow he had known back then who was now a totally new and altered Eric. It was still hard for him to place the image of the new and altered Eric over that of the old Eric and get a match.

But if the man was not the Eric he had always known then who was he and why had he bothered to check on an old friend?

The truth was that he had spent the evening with Eric, even if it was a new and altered Eric, but the man was still (if only in part) the Eric he had known back then. And what pleased him most was that even after attaining higher heights, that Eric had remembered him, remembered an old friend...

"I don't even have much on me right now," Eric had said when they were parting; "You know trying to set up a new business branch here is not easy, it's eating up everything." He had taken out his wallet and started counting out some shiny banknotes, Jude felt his breath caught in his chest as he stared at them, "I'm sorry I didn't anticipate this..."

He handed Jude five shiny ten thousand francs banknotes, the type that looked like they were just from the money making machine. Jude's hand reached for the money involuntarily even as his mind tried to play the silly game of reluctance. It was just one of those situations where the body became separated in several conflicting parts, parts that were just conflicting for show.

"It's not really necessary," Jude tried, the words coming out in a whisper. He felt the familiar shame and guilt.

This is too much, I can't take it.

Do you actually think so, padre?

The banknotes were already lying in his hand even as he tried to protest.

"Oh, forget that nonsense. This is nothing," Eric said, "If I'm what I am today it's because I had friends like you. You were always there by my side back then. If you were not a good friend I'd not have even spent a whole year in the university."

Jude shook his head.

“That’s the truth, you helped me out always like a brother. This is nothing.”

“But it’s too much,” Jude said looking at the money in his hand, his heart already pounding like a locomotive engine. When was the last time he had touched this amount of money? He could not remember. “It’s too much,” he said again.

“Will you just shut up?” Eric laughed slapping him on the back easily, just like he had given him some money for candies, a coin. “Just take it, it’s nothing I’ve told you.”

Jude was stilled trying to cope with the new shock when two more shiny banknotes appeared again. It was after Eric had asked him for his cell phone number.

“I don’t have one yet,” Jude said, hating himself for saying that. He was sounding completely cheap, just as cheap as he felt.

Eric whistled, “You don’t have a cell phone? How do you manage?”

Jude shrugged with a sheepish smile taking over his face. He suddenly felt the full force of that hot shame blast at his face, and it was hot enough to peel off his skin.

“Okay,” Eric nodded, “It’s not a problem.”

When Eric handed him the two new banknotes, he said, “Buy one and give me a call when you do.”

Jude wanted to protest again, but he was completely out of force.

“This is my business card.”

Seventy thousand francs just like that in one evening, without a thought or any reluctance, he still could not believe it. And the money was given to him by the Eric he had always known. Jude shook his head and picked up the business card again from the head of the bed and looked at it for a while. It had all happened like something from a fairy tale where everything was possible even waking up people from dead and he could not find himself coming to terms with it. He would’ve been ashamed to admit it, but he had already checked the money three times since coming into the house, just to make sure it was not all a dream, just to make sure the money was actually there and all his.

And it was always there every time he checked, cool shiny banknotes.

But was it all real? He asked the ceiling, was there something missing from the impossible picture that he could not lay his hand on?

It's simple luck!

He wanted to believe that, wanted to believe something like that was possible in this hard and complicated world.

If it wasn't luck then what do you think happened?

I don't know.

He finally drifted to sleep in the early hours of the morning, the screaming child sounding so far away, still repeating the same words in his mind.

I don't know.

Chapter Twenty-six

Niba listened to him patiently as he talked about Eric, and then asked a question that should normally not have sounded awkward to him, but it did somehow.

“Did you ask him for some network?” Niba asked. It was already two days since his epiphany, and they were sitting over a few bottles of beer in their favorite bar (beer that was being paid for this time by Jude). The bar was still almost empty, with just a few early customers. Jude had already bought a new cell phone with Niba supervising the process like a drill instructor in some military training camp. Niba had an eye for such items and it was when he had weighed the phone in his hand for a while, his head cocked to one side and a frown on his forehead that he gave Jude the order to pay for it.

“It’s a good looking phone, multimedia and strong,” Niba announced when they left the shop, “God the things are getting cheap. One day they’ll measure them on a scale like meat before selling them.”

Jude doubt it could come to that, but the way the prices for cell phones had dropped was something to marvel at.

“China.”

“God bless them, they know what we Africans need.”

“Hmm? Tell me, did you ask him for network?” Niba asked again.

“What network?”

“You know what I mean, man, connections and all that,” Niba said, “If he’s what you say he’s then he’ll be swimming in network, man.”

“I don’t know,” Jude said.

“Don’t start being your serious stupid self again, man.”

Jude looked out, it was drizzling outside, and a thick cloud had covered the sky to make the day look older than it normally was. Jude understood quite well what Niba was talking about. He had also been thinking about the possibility of something like that since that day with Eric. It was clear that Eric had already made it and had done so in a big way. And making it meant he was going to know a lot of people and have a lot of connections, important connections, or at least know a few secrets about making it. It was

easy for such a person to open some doors for a friend, very easy. At least the man had shown to him that he was a true friend, checking him up after all these years (and the money too). So, what could he be afraid of, asking for a favor or two from a man like that?

What favors?

You're not the business type.

Yes, I know but I can learn, everybody can learn.

He turned back to Niba, "I didn't want to start disturbing him with my own problems," he said, "He's going nowhere and I can..."

"You what?" Niba laughed and looked at him as if he was crazy, as if his brain was leaking from his skull right there and seeping through his jacket and onto the floor. "That's the problem with you, man. That's the biggest problem with you," he laughed, "Who waits? Huh? Who waits when some opportunity like that presents itself? Shit, even if the man was trying to hand you a bag full of dough you'll still be hesitating."

"It's still too early to start..."

"It's still too early to start what?"

"I just met him once after how many years..."

"But he was your friend, wasn't he?"

Jude nodded.

"Then what's wrong with trying to ask for some network from your friend?"

Jude shrugged, it sounded logical, but...

"You're an idiot, man," Niba said, and took a long drink from his bottle and shook his head, "You're an idiot." It was there in his eyes, that longing, that wish for a change in places, for the two of them to switch positions so he could show Jude just how to use an opportunity when it presented itself, "You're an idiot, in fact you're the biggest idiot in the whole world that I've ever seen."

Jude just shrugged, but he could see the picture clearly, it was a picture he knew any normal person would see without any problem.

Then why didn't you...

He shook his head.

No! It was premature.

Niba shook his head again, “He’s an opportunity, man, an opportunity, and opportunities come only once in life. I don’t know why you couldn’t see that.” Niba looked at him with some anger now, not being able to understand why Jude could not learn the life lessons he had been trying to feed him all this while. Jude suddenly had a funny vision, a vision of Niba seriously bending him over and spanking him on the buttocks for not acting like a real player. Jude smiled at that vision, “Why are you smiling? It’s not funny, man, your slow brain’s throwing a golden opportunity away.”

Jude just continued to smile, not able to wipe out the vision from his mind.

“You don’t even have to stop and think when you see such an opportunity. Tell me, who can easily give somebody 70.000frs these days? Huh?”

The truth was that Jude did not know anybody who was capable of that.

“The man’s your man and he can help you if you ask him,” Niba was still at it.

“He’s not disappearing into thin air, I told you he was trying to open a business branch here.”

“Yes maybe, but you need to act like a hustler, man.”

“I’m one.”

“Yes and with your way of acting like one, you can meet him a thousand years without making him know that,” Niba said, “You fucked up, man, big time.” Niba took a drink and said again, “Big time.”

An opportunity!

Was that what Eric was? An opportunity? A way for him to get some connections (what connections?), a means for him to get out of the baseless hopeless state he was in and start looking up the rungs of the ladder of success? Was Eric that almighty push that was finally going to take him somewhere up there? Or was it all just his brain, something that Niba was trying hard to plant with his views that could only see the world in green banknotes and gold coins?

He wanted not to know the answer but there was that tiny deep seated voice that was telling him that it was true, that Eric might be that push he had longed for.

An opportunity!

It was ringing in his mind even if some part of him felt guilty thinking that way. It was a selfish idea, a selfish idea that was telling him the only reason he wanted to know the new and altered Eric was because he could somehow help him out. It was a selfish idea that now saw Eric as the giver of seventy thousand francs and not a friend, as a man whom he could still lure and cajole to give more. It sounded bad and he did not want to think that way. Eric had been a friend and he had always done things for him back then in good faith, and Eric was still a friend even if Eric was now a rich and sophisticated Eric. That was the simple way he wanted to think of Eric, as a friend and not some opportunity that could open him doors to another life.

But there was some part of his mind, a more realistic (as far as a poor man's reality goes) part of his mind that saw no harm in thinking the way Niba wanted him to think. It was a part of his mind that lacked the ability to be ashamed or to feel guilty, that part that only saw the world as a battlefield. That part of his mind saw Eric for what he was, an apparition that was going to open some doors for him, an opportunity sent to him by God for him to grab and use. It was a part of his mind that he could not bear to let anybody take a glimpse at.

Don't be naïve, man.

I'm not naïve, it's just trying to be realistic.

But you know the man can...

Do what? What doors can he open for me?

You just need to ask him to know that.

But how did he even become so lucky?

Who cares? What's important is what he can do, and you know he can do many things.

Jude blinked and took a drink; he could not believe he was even thinking that way.

"Next time you see him, don't hesitate," Niba said finally, "Ask him for some connection."

Jude shook his head and smiled.

"Even God can understand that."

Chapter Twenty-seven

It became the only thing alive in his head (even if it filled him with shame and guilt), the idea of the new and altered Eric as an opportunity, that access to the higher rungs of the ladder of life. It was an idea he was starting to hate even as it was already instituted in his brain and continuing to colonize every section of his brain. At times he blamed Niba for the idea, for enforcing the idea in his head with his constant hammering.

But was Niba all that responsible? Was it not possible that he had already had the idea lying in his brain in some guarded compartment (an idea that was there and he knew about it but kept lying to himself it had not been there?), and that Niba had simply awakened it?

Then Niba was to be blamed for awakening the idea.

And he had embraced it too, embraced it with enough enthusiasm to completely shut off the screaming child in the next room or the constant barrages at each other between Derrick and *the dragon lady*. The idea was strong enough to do that and to keep him in a world of fantasy, where he could start seeing himself walking down that path of success, a path that was completely mapped out and made possible by Eric. Eric had found success and had been around to check on him, an old friend, and he could not see any reason why someone with that type of a heart would not want to see that old friend become someone successful.

But successful in what sense?

It was stupid when he looked at it with an eye he wanted to believe was that of reality. What debt did Eric have towards him? None, that was the answer. Why should Eric want to even stretch a helping hand towards him? He could not see any reason, it was all just stupid wishful thinking, something that only a child was supposed to do. But...

“Ask and you shall receive,” Niba had told him, quoting the Scriptures, “If you don’t ask you’ll never know.”

Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened... That was what the Scriptures said, and the Scriptures said it had been the words of the greatest prophet mankind had ever seen or heard of. The words were straight forward, so easy to understand and apply. But there

was nothing straight forward and easy about them, and that was due to the fact that the words were meant to be applied by human beings, and human beings suffered from a disease called Pride. Granted there were some who actually got healed from that disease as they made their way through life's fire and hell, but there were still others who were full of that disease in a manner that it was becoming their shield. It was a shield that made them cold-footed, that shield that made them reluctant and filled with shame and guilt at having to go down begging before another human being, even if that human being was their better. Jude was in this second group and even if in his head, where a brain was resting and trying to go into turmoil about the idea, there was still enough of that shield around him.

You've to be a hustler, man.

That was easier said than done, for how could he go to Eric and open his mouth and start asking him for help? Just because Eric was now wealthy and sophisticated did not make him anything better than him, Eric was still a human being (even if he was rich), and there was no way he was going to go down on his knees before him and start begging him for anything.

If he thinks he can do anything for...

But why should Eric be thinking of doing anything for him? Eric was not his father and had no right whatsoever to even think about him.

Forget your stupid pride, man.

Yes, and become a blockhead.

He was poor and had no future that he knew of, but he was not a blockhead, he was not going to be some stupid idiot who was ready to stoop low enough and become a shameless beggar.

He found himself getting angry for even thinking about Eric being an opportunity. He somehow wished Eric had not appeared.

Chapter Twenty-eight

I'm not a beggar and I'm not going to be one.

It was that clear to him. So, despite the enormous advice and coaching from Niba at every second they had together now, or the fact that even part of his brain wanted to see the logic in that, or the fact that the Scriptures had a simplified version of it all in its “ask and you shall receive,” he found himself hating the fate that had led the new and altered Eric to his own corner of the world. He was not some poor beggar who was going to sit at the roadside with a dish and ask for coins. He still had his pride as a man, even if that was the only thing that he had.

And how lucky had Eric been?

He could not stop asking himself that question; it was always popping out from nowhere.

It's not your business.

“The man’s opening a business here,” Niba told him once, “You said so yourself.”

“Yes, so?”

“You can ask him to let you run things for him.”

Jude shook his head.

“Come one, man, be a hustler.”

It was going to be an insult for him to go up to Eric and ask for that favor, an insult that he did not think he could bear. Niba could not see that, but he could see it. There was no way he was going to walk up and kneel before some impossible rich man with the natural rich air around him and ask for something like that, even if that rich man had once been a poor fellow like him and a friend.

He wasn’t going to ask for anything or even talk about his life with Eric, even at their third meeting. This time they were in a classy restaurant, a restaurant that Jude had never known existed. It was the type where the prices were bound to touch the ceiling and shoot through the roof and he hated himself for even accepting to enter the place as he sat across from Eric, looking at a plate of food he could not even start to describe, only knowing there was a large piece of chicken inside that looked particular

inviting and delicious. He hated Eric for bringing him there; it was just another rich man's tactics to make him feel how poor and worthless he was. He glanced up at Eric who was eating away, looking completely relaxed and comfortable in the milieu.

"How's the job going?" Eric asked looking up and noticing him looking at him.

"Huh?" Jude looked back down at his own plate, feeling that familiar unease. He did not belong here and he could feel it, even the other customers in the restaurant could see it. He did not belong in this restaurant and he did not belong with this man sitting across from him.

What am I doing here?

"The job, your job in the shop," Eric said and took a sip of the wine on the table. The wine was the most expensive wine in the restaurant, and Eric had made sure of that before asking for it. He had actually tasted it when it was brought to their table and took almost five minutes letting Jude know how great the wine tasted.

"Fine, I think," Jude said and tried a forced smile. He took a sip of the wine and looked outside. It was still afternoon, and he could hear the sound of the afternoon traffic that seemed to be coming from another planet. The restaurant was situated in its own world, a world that eliminated every uncomfortable sound and every uncomfortable view. It was peaceful enough to lull even the heart of any hard working rich fellow. But Jude was not feeling that peace, this was a lunch break he was starting to wish had not happened, just like he was starting to wish he had never known this man sitting across from him. "It's going great," he said and turned back to the table.

Eric slowly and delicately cut out a piece of chicken and chewed on it for a while, swallowing it with some wine, "How's the salary condition?" he asked without looking at Jude, expertly cutting another piece of his chicken.

"Huh?" Jude tried to eat, only feeling the discomfort as he chewed the food. He could not say he actually knew the taste of the food, but he was certain it was great. It was just that...

"The salary condition, the pay, how's it? Is it any good?"

What do you want to know? Is this somehow to mock me?

He could actually hear Eric's voice inside his head telling him in his new and recorded voice, "You were a very intelligent student back then, you came out with a good degree, and top of your class didn't you? Where are you now? Where's that degree taking you these days? A shop sales boy?"

"Hey are you okay?"

Jude looked up and blinked, tried a smile and said, "Yes, I'm fine...oh the salary..., well...it's not that bad."

Eric smiled, "How much is it, if I may ask?"

"Twenty," Jude said and felt a need to scratch his head. He was lying and the funniest part was that he did not even know why he was lying.

Your salary's 15.000frs, padre, and you know it.

But he doesn't have to know that.

What would change if he knows it?

Nothing, but I don't want him to.

"Twenty," Eric said and whistled, allowing his eating tools to fall on the plate with a noisy clang. Jude suddenly thought he was going to start laughing, just double over and start laughing like back then when people liked picking on him about his trousers, but Eric repeated slowly, "Twenty."

Jude could see something in Eric's eyes; he did not know what that something was. It could be anything from surprise to amusement, he decided.

"Twenty," Eric said again, "Did I hear you well? Did you mean twenty thousand?"

Jude nodded.

Eric whistled and shook his head; genuine concern stole through his face, "Even a night watch..." he shook his head again, "I can't believe it."

Welcome to the real world.

Jude felt that hate coming back again, Eric did not believe that somebody could be paid that low now, and why? Well, because luck had smiled on him, smiled on him and made him forget what getting a real job in Cameroon entailed. He could not even see that he was better than others, even if he was receiving a meager salary that could not even keep him up for a week, even if after his three years in the university and a good degree he was just a sales boy, a sales boy who had the same status with Okoro, Okoro who was the closest thing to a nonentity he knew.

It was sad.

“For how long?”

Jude said nothing.

“How long have you been there?”

“Two years now.”

“Since you left school.”

Jude nodded.

And I was even lucky to get that job.

Eric shook his head, “How do you survive?”

Jude shrugged though he could feel the anger rising now in waves. He felt like saying something to Eric, something that was going to punch a hole through that air surrounding him. But he did not know what he could say to do that. How do you survive?

“I manage,” he said instead.

“Jesus, that’s too small for a man like you,” Eric said, “What am I even saying? That’s not even small, but it’s beyond small.”

Eric took a sip of his wine and looked at him for a while, a frown still on his face, and then he asked, “What’re your plans?”

Jude shrugged.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Everybody has a plan for the future, and there is certainty in that. Even those poor people close to the grave and knowing their fate still draw plans for the future. Some plans can be really outrageous and hairy, while some can be serious and realistic, but they are all plans for the future. And still some edge towards the border of wishful thinking and sheer fantasizing, but even at this extreme, they still stand out as plans for the future.

The only problem with all this planning is usually feasibility, and in most of the cases that feasibility is just plain financial.

Jude did not know where he could locate himself in all these categories, but he wanted to believe that he had a serious plan, and a simple one at that. He wanted to go back to school, that was his simple and serious plan. The only problem was the feasibility, and that was financial as it was always the case. But that was settled in his mind, the part that there was a straight forward plan for the future which he did not know if he would one day realize.

The thing he could not understand was why Eric wanted to know about his plan for his uncertain future.

He wants to give you a job, idiot.

And how do you know that?

Then what do you think all this has been about?

“You can’t be thinking of wasting all your life in that shop,” Eric was saying, now his eating tools back in his hand.

Jude suddenly felt like punching the man sitting across from him and now cutting up another piece of chicken. Did he actually think he had gone to the shop because he had had a choice?

“No,” Jude said instead.

“That would be the craziest thing a man can want to do,” Eric laughed, “So, what do you want to do? You know in the future, what do you plan to do now?”

Jude shrugged again, “I don’t know yet.” *And even if I told you I don’t see what you can do about it.* He did not want to do business like Eric and even if

that idea had been plaguing his mind about what Eric might be capable of doing for him, his only real wish on this earth was to go back to school...

"But if he can give you a serious job that pays, let's say he allows you to control his business here, that'd make it easy for you to go back to your stupid school," Niba had told him.

"Who said he'll want me to run anything?" he had asked seeing the merits of something like that happening.

"Here we go again."

"You're kidding me," Eric said, "Everybody has a plan for the future, and I know you well enough don't forget that."

Jude thought for a while and said slowly, "I want to go back to school, that's all."

"That's good," Eric had to cross the table with his upper body to pat him on the shoulder, "That's a plan there." He filled Jude's glass with wine and said, "You've always loved school."

Jude nodded.

"What do you want to go back and do in school?"

"Masters in chemistry," Jude said.

Eric took a sip of his wine and asked, "Where?"

"Hmm?"

"Where do you want to go and do it?"

"Buea," Jude said

"The University of Buea," Eric said quietly.

Jude nodded, "That's all I want to do."

"Go back to UB?"

Jude nodded again.

"That's funny," Eric laughed.

"Why? What's funny about wanting to go back to Buea?" The man was enjoying this, he could see it.

"Nothing," Eric said and tried not to laugh, he looked at Jude's wine glass and said, "You don't seem to like wine or even the food."

"No it's okay."

"You know you can ask for something else, if you want a beer instead..."

"No I'm fine, the food's good."

They sat for a while in silence, Jude trying the food again.

“You don’t think big,” Eric said suddenly.

“What do you...?”

“Buea?” Eric shook his head.

“What’s wrong with Buea?”

“Nothing,” Eric said and thought for a while, “It’s just that I expected you to say something else, to have a little more ambition.

Chapter Thirty

“Then he told me I wasn’t thinking big,” he said the words without hating himself for saying them. The anger and that feeling of being insulted were now completely gone. In fact he felt excited, felt like he was someone new, someone new who was heading for something big and worthwhile.

As usual Niba was there, listening to him like he was giving a life saving sermon.

“That I had to have a little ambition,” Jude said.

“That’s more than true.”

“What’s true?”

“Everything he said about...”

“Shut up.”

They both laughed and it was one of those laughs that actually felt good.

The beer before him was still untouched, even though Niba was already wolfing down his second beer. Jude did not really feel like drinking the beer, he did not need any beer today.

I can even stop drinking the thing like it’s the only thing I’ve to do in life.

“Are you going to drink that or what?” Niba asked as if he could hear his thoughts.

Jude took the beer and swallowed a mouthful, not failing to notice how tasteless it was now.

“That’s better, I hate to drink alone,” Niba said, “So, what did he say after that?”

“Is there something wrong with me wanting to go back to Buea and get my masters?” he had asked Eric his words coming out with the bitterness he felt inside.

Who’re you to tell me I’m not ambitious? What the hell do you mean by that?

Eric shook his head, “No, there’s nothing wrong with that, nothing I can think of, the University of Buea is actually a good school,” he said and took a sip of his wine, Jude feeling the anger burble inside watching the smile on Eric’s face.

Why did I come here?

“Then what’s the matter?” his voice still laced with the bitterness, he could actually taste them as they came out of his mouth. What did Eric think he knew that he did not know in this life? Just because Eric was now a rich fellow didn’t mean he knew anything or that he had the right to tell him what he was and what he wasn’t.

“Buea’s fine, but the problem’s Buea.” Eric indicated for the waitress to clear their table. When she was gone he said again, “Buea’s the problem.” The waitress brought their bill and he saw Eric hand her two clean ten thousand banknotes, “Bring my friend a beer.”

“No, no...” Jude did no longer want anything from the man, in fact all he wanted to do was get up and storm out of the place.

“I insist,” Eric said and turned to the waitress, “And keep the change.” When she brought the beer and left Eric said, “She’s attractive, if only I was not,” he showed Jude his ring finger, “She wants us to be married before next year.”

Jude said nothing; he did not even touch the beer before him.

Eric leaned back in his seat and interlocked his fingers over his already protruding belly and said, “Buea,” he shook his head, “I still hate that place. Why do you want to think about something small like Buea when you can think of something big?”

“You still haven’t told me what’s wrong with...”

“Buea? There’re better schools around.”

“But not in this country.”

“Yes, that’s the point.”

“I don’t...”

“The world is filled with good schools, schools that offer better programs.”

Schools for the rich. What am I doing sitting here and listening to this fool insult me?

“I know you’ll say they’re expensive.”

“Yes, and even getting a scholarship these days is not easy.” Jude said.

“Nothing’s impossible when you really want it bad enough,” Eric said.

Nothing’s impossible...

“It just depends on how bad you want to succeed,” Eric was saying, “Look at me, could anyone have believed that...?” he shook his head and said, “It’s easy, I don’t think you want to become a sub-Saharan professor.”

That brought a smile to Jude's face even if he still felt a little insulted, that word sub-Saharan professor.

"You're intelligent, I've always admired your intelligence and I cannot want to see you waste that in a school like Buea and come out and have every dull idiot who went overseas calling you a sub-Saharan professor."

"But all the schools out there are expensive and even if they give you a scholarship it's still not easy to go." *And I can't even manage to go back to Buea where I just need a tiny tuition fee.*

"Yes, I know money can be a problem, but it's not always the problem," Eric was looking at him still leaning back in the chair, his hands laced and lying on his belly. He looked like some old politician who was trying to convince a young elementary school pupil to assure him of his vote, "You can get admission in almost any school, can't you?"

Jude nodded, "Yes, I think so."

Where was the man going to with all this talk?

"Then I'll want you to do that," Eric said, unlaced his hands and sat up, "After you get admission, we'll see what we can do, I'm sure we can work something out."

Before they left the restaurant, Eric told him in a serious voice that sounded old enough to belong to someone lying on his dead bed, "Life is about making sacrifices, that's all."

Chapter Thirty-one

It didn't take longer that he had thought it would take. In less than a month, one surprisingly bright April morning, the world all covered now in green, he found himself at the post office collecting his admission letter. It was inside an important looking envelop along with the school's brochure. His heart was pounding heavily in his chest as he held the envelop in his hands. This was his gateway, the gateway into another life, a life that he had always wanted.

But how was it going to happen? He asked himself, how was Eric going to do the magic? Was he going to simply hand him money to start following the procedures? And how many procedures were they? He did not even have a passport yet, and he needed to go to the embassy which meant money, and even the transportation, the flight and the tuition...he could not see how it was going to be possible.

Get an admission and we'll see what we can do, we can work something out.

He had the admission letter in his hand and a colored brochure that told him everything he wanted to know about the school but he did not see how they were going to work something out.

It was impossible!

Nothing's is impossible if you want it bad enough.

He wanted to believe that, but he could not.

"Let me see," Niba said when he walked into the shop that evening.

"Take care," Jude said handing him the envelop and its contents.

"I'm not going to bite it, man," Niba laughed. He looked at the contents of the envelop for a while and shook his head, "I still can't believe it."

"You can't believe what, that I've admission?"

"No, that of all the countries in the world you chose Britain," Niba said and shook his head in wonder, "You're completely crazy," he said and handed back the envelop to Jude, "Completely crazy."

"Britain has the best schools."

"Who cares about best? I'm talking about a country where you can hustle, man. America's there and you go and chose Britain, Britain where you can't even hustle, where you'll come back empty handed."

“My only problem’s a postgraduate degree.”

“You’ll never change.”

All he cared about was going back to school and getting himself a postgraduate degree - any school, even if it meant going back to Buea. That was all, or so he believed, for at the end of the day it was one of those subtle lies that the mind accepted because of conditions. It was a lie he would’ve accepted to live with if he had not held the school brochure in his hand, all colored and filled with pictures of the school and all sort of promises about what programs were available to him, all the opportunities. This was what he wanted, to go to a proper school and come out with a proper degree. It was the dream of every serious aspirant.

A postgraduate study was good, but being able to jump that social bridge and find yourself away from sub-Sahara was the biggest thing. A postgraduate degree from Africa and from Cameroon in particular was like a thatched hut, while a postgraduate degree from overseas was like a villa, a shiny villa that everyone was going to look at with a lot of admiration and jealousy. It was one of those things that created a rift in the university communities, the issue of an overseas degree and a sub-Saharan degree. It was a rift that was strong enough to separate them into two camps, one made up of cheap and angry and always voiceless people, facing a camp of rich and completely reassuring people who commanded everything. It was a rift that when given a choice, anyone would easily pick the right camp without needing any prodding. And now, he had the opportunity to make a choice.

Jude looked at the brochure in his hand and slowly replaced it into the envelop along with the admission letter. He kept them on his counter where he could keep a keen eye on them.

For you just can’t know.

“When he calls you next time don’t forget,” Niba said.

“Forget what?”

“What do you mean forget what? Didn’t I tell you?”

“Didn’t you tell me what?”

“About my business plan, man. You remember my business plan, don’t you?”

“What business plan?”

“Oh, come on.”

“When did you start having a business plan?”

“I always have a business plan,” Niba said, “That friend of yours might help me out.”

“Shut up.”

“It’s still in my head man, but I know it’s going to be a big business, wait till you see it.”

“Shut up.”

“I’m serious, man.”

“Yes, I know and that’s why I want you to shut up.”

After a while Niba said, “You’re lucky, man, you’re very lucky. I need to have a friend like that, someone who can just come and solve things for me like that. I’m not saying I don’t have friends, but I don’t have any friend or even know any man who can be like that your friend.”

They were silent for a while, and then Niba asked, “How’re you ever going to repay him?”

Chapter Thirty-two

*H*ow're you ever going to repay him?

He was still thinking about that line two days ago, when he talked with Eric, thinking about it and finding no answer. He could not see how he could repay Eric and even why Eric was willing to stretch out his neck just to help him.

He's your friend.

But was that all? That Eric was doing all this for him because they had once known each other?

Why else would he be trying to help you?

I don't know.

Eric told him about a man he wanted him to go and meet, "He's a friend and he can help you with everything," Eric told him over the phone, "It's just that I won't be in Bamenda anytime soon, I'd have loved to present you to him myself, but there's no problem, I've talked to him about your little problem and he understands."

The man's name was Tange Bruno, and Jude could not start to understand how he was going to be instrumental in facilitating things for him, but if Eric was telling him that, then it was going to happen.

"You know how the country is," Eric was saying, "To get around certain places you need someone who knows what to do and my friend, Bruno, he knows what to do and a lot more."

Chapter Thirty-three

“So, who’s the man?” Niba asked him.

“I don’t know yet, but he said the man is his friend, probably one of his business acquaintances.”

“I told you the man had connections.”

Jude shrugged, “I don’t know. I don’t even have his number yet, Eric’s going to send it to me any moment from now.”

Niba patted him on the shoulder and smiled, “Don’t worry, that your friend’s not a fake, he’s connected and to the right people.”

I hope so.

But what was the meaning of being connected to the right people? What did he do to deserve to get connected to someone, to deserve all the help Eric was trying to give him? (*And how’re you ever going to repay him?*). Who was the man actually?

“What does the man do?” Niba was asking.

“Huh?”

“You know, the man you’re going to meet, what does he do for a living? Didn’t your friend tell you something?”

Jude shook his head, “I think I’ll know all that when I meet the man.”

But he could not stop thinking about the question Niba had just asked him; what did the man do for a living? How was the man capable of helping him? Who was the man and what connections did the man have to help him out?

I don’t know...And what do you really care? All you should think about is the fact that soon, very soon you’ll be out of this shitty country and doing what you’ve always wanted to do.

But how was the man going to make that possible?

You know this country, to get around certain places you need to know someone who knows what to do.

Yes, he could understand that; understand the fact that in Cameroon to get something like a passport was going to be something that called for a godfather. Not that it was not possible to get one, but the problem was the time it took (and that time was forever), and when the passport was needed

in the right time, there was need for some mouth rubbing or for the presence of someone who could say a word and cause a bunch of people to tap dance.

The worst thing was getting around getting a visa; it was something that in other words was a nightmare, a nightmare because there was no clear-cut criteria, no clear-cut direction that could give you any assurance. At times it sounded just like pure luck, an act of God. But somehow, in this world of man, there was always a way, and a person that could show that way.

Was the man such a person?

Surely, Jude thought the man was such a person, someone who could pull some weight, which was why Eric was so positive about arranging a meeting for him with the man. But who was...

"I know what it means to get some of these things," Eric had told him, "But I can assure you that my friend can do all these things for you in less time than you can believe."

Open doors you didn't believe could be opened.

He could understand that, but what he could not understand was where the tuition fee and the flight fare and all the money was going to come from. Yes, Cameroon was a land where people could open doors for you and all that, but what was going to happen when all those doors were already opened and held open for him? Where was he going to take all the funds that were needed to march through the open doors?

"You don't worry about that, when the time comes, we'll cross that bridge, I promise you. Just go see this friend of mine when he tells you to come and do what he tells you to do and everything's going to be alright. Do you understand?"

Yes.

Do what he tells you to do....

And what was that going to be? Jude could not stop asking himself that question. What was the price he was going to pay for all these favors that were being done for him? People did not do things to people just for the sake of doing things, just for nothing. There was always a price to be paid. But here, what was that price going to be when what Eric was willing to do for him was this big? So big he could not even understand what was actually happening with his life. Eric was his friend, a friend who was proving to be

more than a friend, but was he going to just spend money on him for nothing? All the tons of money?

God sent him to you.

God?

Who else? What's in your head? What do you think Eric will want from you in return? What do you have that Eric will want in return?

Nothing, I've nothing.

And from what he could see, Eric was capable of even spending money on him without feeling anything, without any change in his account. Eric was already in that category, the category that could hand you a fortune without even looking or thinking twice. How much had Eric used on him so far? He could only wonder...

There's no such man on this earth, people don't just spend their money for nothing.

Eric's not people, there're always exceptions in this life; exceptions in everything no matter how it looked.

But why? Why was Eric that exception?

You're just too paranoid!

Yes, he thought, he was just trying to embrace all the paranoia on earth when there was no reason for him to.

He's your friend.

"The man's here in Bamenda?" Niba was asking.

"I don't know, when I'll call him then I'll know."

"You're lucky, man, very lucky."

I was just luck, that's all.

Yes, he was lucky, that was certain.

Chapter Thirty-four

He called the man that evening, when Eric sent him the man's number. The voice that answered was a gentle and soft voice, the type that caused you to start drawing images in your mind, images of a person who was filled with nothing but goodness, someone who was humble and honest. It was the type of voice that reassured you that everything you wanted in life was going to be handed to you and without any problem. The voice that started melting away the paranoia.

That soft voice gave him a rendezvous for the next day.

When he arrived home that evening feeling light-headed and filled with anticipation and a vision for a future that was still impossible for him to fully look at, Derrick was at it with his wife, *the dragon lady*. It was one of the usual stories; Derrick had been seen drinking in a bar with a lady (seen by who, Jude could not even guess), and somehow *the dragon lady* had gotten wind of it. Derrick was trying to tell her, actually stuttering before her, that the lady in question was just one of his colleagues, a teacher who taught in the same school with him.

"She's not," she screamed, the baby screaming nearby on the couch completely forgotten, "I'm not stupid, do I look like I'm stupid."

"I didn't say that...I was...I'm just..."

"Then why are you lying to me? You womanizer! Why are you lying to me? Because you think I'm stupid? I'll show you one day, I'll teach you a lesson one of these days. You womanizer! I'll teach you how to keep your stupid penis in your pants..."

The same things...

"...You stupid man! Is it every skirt you see that you must sleep with? Huh? What do you take me for? Don't worry, don't just worry, I'll teach you a lesson one day..."

...Every bloody day.

I'll be free from this madness.

"I didn't do anything..."

"Shut up!"

I'll soon be free from this insanity and I want it to be as a surprise to them.

That night he did not go to sleep, he just lay there on his bed listening to the child scream its lungs out in the next room and telling himself that it was not a problem any longer. It was just the last days in hell, his last days to listen to the poor child scream its lungs out, the last days that sound will vibrate from inside his head and down to his teeth. He was going to leave this hell pretty soon, sooner than any of them could ever believe, and the beautiful thing was that none of them could even guess what was happening in his life right now.

And that's great, great because he was going to surprise them, and show them that life could have a lot of surprises reserved for people, even people like him.

He looked up at the ceiling and wanted to shout at that white colored ceiling;

I'll soon be free from this hell!

Chapter Thirty-five

The taxi was hot inside, even though it was cold outside and Jude could see low clouds hanging over every visible hill. There was no rain yet, but the level of cloud cover showed that it was going to rain, even if not soon. The low cloud was going to lift and show the face of a darker cloud which was going to bring the rain. But despite all the approaching wetness and the outside cold, Jude could not help himself from sweating. He took off the jacket he was wearing, his hands shaking slightly.

Damn it! Stop shaking. What's wrong with you?

He wanted to tell his hands to stop shaking, to tell the cold and queer feeling of anticipation and anxiety in his stomach to just disappear. It did not make any sense, all that shaking and the feeling, he told himself. He was going to see the man, to truly start on his path to the future, and he did not see any reason he was feeling that queer feeling in his stomach. It was...

"What's the matter with you, man?" Niba had asked him immediately that afternoon walking into the shop, "Did you call the man?"

"Yes."

"Then what's the problem? You don't look very enthusiastic to me," Niba said.

"I'm fine."

Niba shook his head vigorously, "No, you're not, you can't fool me. Tell me what the problem is."

"I said there's no problem," Jude said though he could not stop that queer feeling inside his stomach, that cold queer feeling that he had woken up in the morning and discovered to be growing inside his stomach, "I'm just thinking."

"Thinking about what? What did the man say?"

"He told me to meet him at Ayaba Hotel today at five in the evening."

Niba looked at him for a while in silence like a psychiatrist examining a particularly difficult patient, and then said, "It's the hotel."

"What?" Jude laughed, a laugh that sounded a bit nervous to his ears, "What do you mean?"

"It's the hotel, that's why you look this way."

“Which way and what has the hotel done?”

“You’re afraid of the hotel,” Niba laughed, “Come on, man, it’s nothing, Ayaba’s nothing.”

But was that why he was feeling the way he was feeling?

What do you think?

I don't know. The hotel was an issue; it was his first time going to that hotel. He had always been looking at it as if it was something from a postcard, the Ayaba hotel standing there on its hill and looking down at the town as if it were mocking the town. It was the best hotel in town, and an impressive looking building that had a lift system (as Niba had informed him promptly, trying to sound as helpful as his diabolic smiles could allow him to be) and a swimming pool outside, so it was definitely a place for people who were already somewhere up there. And now he was going to that hotel, and to meet with somebody he did not even know.

That was bound to make him somehow nervous, even if it was just a little. But he was not sure that all that queer feeling inside his stomach was due to that fact. No, it was due to something else...

But what?

That he did not know, but the feeling was there and the feeling was there because of something...something that was trying to jump up from deep down in his mind and come out to the surface. Something that he had no name for...

It's paranoia, padre, just useless paranoia.

But was it completely useless?

What do you think? You're going to a strange place and to meet with a strange person, someone whom you have never seen before.

“Hey, man, don’t start thinking like an idiot again,” Niba had told him, “The man’s the only way out for you, man.”

The man's the only way out for you.

That strong thought accompanied him as he walked into the hotel lobby. The man was not only his way out, but was one of his saviors, yes, Eric was his grand savior but somehow he knew things could not be complete without the help of the man. Even if the man was going to help him because of Eric, the man was still his savior, for what the man was going to do was going to benefit him directly and not actually Eric.

They were two angels God had sent to help him.

He did not take the lift; Niba had told him something about the side effect of the lift.

“You can easily vomit in the lift if you’re not used to it,” Niba had told him with his smile still on his face, “And shit if the electricity goes off,” he shook his head, “You’ll never get out of there.”

The door was there in front of him and he could see the number clearly. Maybe the man was not inside, he thought, maybe the man was not even here or was not going to come or something more important had come up and the man had left.

He knocked on the door, softly, the shaking coming again and this time more powerful just like that queer feeling in his stomach.

He was about to knock on the door again when he heard a voice from inside, “Just a moment please.”

He heard footsteps coming towards the door, and he had a crazy thought (just one of those thoughts that came out of nowhere at all) before the door was opened in his face, the thought to turn around and run as fast as he could, run and not look back.

But he was in place at the door when it opened and he saw the face of the man that was going to be his way out of misery, his savior who was going to grant him his wish for a better future.

The face broke into a charming smile and said, “Hi, do come in.”

Chapter Thirty-six

There's always something about waking up in some form of peace and tranquility, something that can not actually be described unless if it involves talking about all that overwhelming feeling (which can at times be very false), that feeling which says everything is okay. It is a rare emotional state and it is fond of creating that cherished illusion that nothing bad is ever going to happen.

Jude woke up that morning with that overwhelming feeling and also with another added feeling that was equally overwhelming; a feeling of familiarity. It was profound, just like waking up in a bed where he belonged. No not even that, like waking up in a bed where he had always belonged, that was more like it.

I belong here, he told the ceiling. I belong here somehow. He was even sure the ceiling could accept that statement. The ceiling had once been white in color but it was now a color that could have thrown the carpenter who worked on it and the painter who painted it into a fit, and it was infested by termites.

I belong here; he thought again, I belong here somehow...that's why I'm here. That's why I came back, why I came here that evening...But he did not want to think about that evening, that particular evening that he had started with some heat and had ended in total cold...he did not want to think about that evening or even go to that part of his brain where the events of that evening were now stored. That part of his brain that was locked and he was at the moment trying to seal.

I don't want to think about that now. I don't even want to ever think about that.

But...

I'm okay now, and I'm not going to think about it.

At times he found himself thinking about that evening before he could even caution his brain. He finds himself going back to that memory without any way to hold back. But this morning, he was not going to do that, this morning he was going to marvel at the rare good feeling he was feeling and the familiarity that surrounded him as he lay in the small bed...The familiarity of the room, yes, that was what he wanted to go on in his head,

that idea that he belonged where he now was, in bed and in the room. It was his environment, even if new (well, not really new in the sense that he had never been there, but new in the sense that he was now living there), his niche. He belonged in that niche, and was already used to the scent of his niche, to the various items that surrounded his niche. Everything was as familiar and normal just like the idea that he was now with a constant female presence around him, a constant female presence that was strong enough to wash away the nervousness of before. The female voice that was always trying to say something pleasing enough, those eyes that were now able to glow with a light he had never believed to be there, all that was normal to him now, a part of him now. I belong here, he thought again.

And I can't still believe it.

Me neither, padre.

“Shit! What’s gotten into you, man? Are you crazy or what?” Niba had screamed at him when he had informed Niba of what he had decided to do, “Look, man if the problem’s a place to lay down your head I can...”

Jude shook his head.

“Then what’s come over you?”

“Nothing has come over me.”

“Then how can you do something like this?” Niba asked shaking his head with a look in his eyes that said he thought Jude was completely insane, “Have you forgotten who she is? Have you forgotten, man?”

No, he had not forgotten who she was and who she still was and who she was going to be. But there were certain times in life when such things happened and really did not matter, times when such things just looked like trivial matters.

“I haven’t forgotten,” he had told Niba, “I’ll never forget all that but I don’t think it matters.”

“Jesus God! What did she do to you?”

“Nothing.”

“Do you actually listen to yourself, man? Do you?”

It didn’t matter, Jude told himself, it didn’t matter, all that mattered was that it felt normal and natural, that he felt no nervousness or shame waking up every morning in her bed (“I escaped that prison at least and that’s something...and she’s everything better than what might’ve happened that

evening...”), but actually felt okay just like he was feeling this morning about it. He felt a lot of solace here, more than he had ever felt anywhere else...

“She’s a prostitute, man, just a prostitute. Do you want me to spell it out for you? P.R.O.S.T.I.T.U.T.E. A whore, sex for hire without a soul. She doesn’t care for nobody, all she cares about at the end of the day is money.”

“No, she’s not like that.”

“They all seem that way at first,” Niba laughed a frustrated laugh.

“I’m not paying her any coin.”

Niba shook his head, “Jesus I can’t even believe this. Of all the women on earth, all the free women waiting for you to just open your mouth and say something,” he shook his head again, “I don’t believe it, man, I just don’t believe it, what’s so special about her? Huh? There’re women out there, thousands of them.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I just can’t believe it.”

But this time Jude could hear that acceptance in his voice, that submission to something called defeat that was looming in the horizon. He looked at Jude and smiled shaking his head again, “I just can’t believe it.”

I can’t believe it too.

Disbelief was one of those words that were dancing in his mind these days. But it was a word that was coated with a lot of reality when he looked at it more.

Yes, reality because even for someone like him who now thought he had a cool and level head, it was still difficult to come to terms with the fact that he was now here, lying in Mabel’s bed and actually feeling comfortable about it. Or the fact that he was going to be waking up in this bed (with a bed sheet that was stained from sources he could not allow his mind to duel on), every morning, smelling the now familiar murky smell that came with dampness, and not really hating it. Or more, the fact that she had totally taken him back in her arms, just like nothing had happened some months back between them, just like everything had been just fine and he had been regular as usual. It was completely unbelievable, and at times he actually pinched himself just to make sure he was really alive, and not sleeping somewhere and dreaming all this up.

And he had vowed...

Nothing in the world would have convinced him that after that day, the day when they had been with the butcher, he would come back here in this room. He had vowed and prayed about it. And he had somehow felt that it was the same with her, she was bound to feel the same way towards even seeing his face, bound to feel the revulsion that was supposed to come after such an act. And not only that, there she had had the right to hate him, the right to hate him for turning her into a murderer then disappearing into thin air before she could even come to terms with it...

"Women are made to forgive us, man," Niba had told him one day after everything was in place even inside Niba's head, "It's in their nature. And someone like her, let's face it, she must even be happy you came back to see her, man."

He had grown up with a woman who had had the biggest heart he had ever seen, his mother. She had and was still forgiving his father day after day, after all his craziness. At times, he wondered why she was still with him, why she was still ready to do anything to please him even after she had caught him red-handed with his pants down and a young woman (who was almost the age of his second and last child with his legal wife) gyrating under him like an acrobat from some fantasy land. It was all difficult for him to comprehend...

It's in their nature.

But still he had had nightmares before about all this, about even talking to her; talk less walking pass the threshold of her room again. Nightmares that gave him only one conclusion, that there was no way she could accept to see him stroll back into her life again as if he had not done some damage, as if he had not done some damage and then disappeared. But she had accepted him back without even any sign of restraint four weeks ago, that particular evening when he had taken a glimpse at some of the wheels that made the world turn...

And in some way, that was sad. She was human and those days when he tried to examine himself and what he had done to her, he always found himself going back to feeling guilty and hating himself. Those days were the only days that made him want to feel a type about sharing her room. But they were few now, and were growing fewer.

“Forget about it,” she had told him that wet evening after the pressure had gone and the ugly taste of vomit was back in his mouth. He had been trying to say something, to say a word that could start a foundation of a bridge between them, the guilt written on his face and in his voice. She had looked at him with her plain face and her sad eyes as he fumbled with his words trying hard to avoid looking at her, and said, “It’s the past, and we were stupid, let’s just forget about it.”

Jude stared at the old ceiling not actually seeing it or thinking about it. He was in another world, not even in the room, but in another world, the world that opened when he allowed his wandering mind to spoil the peace and tranquility of waking up feeling okay. His wandering mind was still trying to understand why he had finally ended up here, why he was now in this room and lying in this bed. It was something Niba had asked and still continue asking him, “Why are you doing this, man?”

I still don't know.

But you are here?

Yes, I'm here.

Then you should know why you're doing this.

“Why are you doing this to yourself?” Niba would ask, knowing that there was nothing else to do to stop him. The knowledge was there and he had accepted it without any problem. She was a prostitute and they had both paid her and slept with her, but that was not a problem. She was still a prostitute, still offering her body to people to be able to pay the bills and the rents, but that was not a problem. But why was it not a problem? How was it that he could accept all that and swallow it and be here smiling?

I wish I knew.

“Why her, man?”

“I don’t know.”

And that sounded like the truth, for things happened in the world and most of the time there was no way to know why they did. Things just happened, that was all.

“Is it still because of the pregnancy thing? Is it some guilt because of what happened? Is that what’s pushing you to do something this stupid?”

“Hey, I honestly don’t know.”

“Jesus, man, you can’t be telling me that. Has this got something to do with love?”

Chapter Thirty-seven

Was this what this was all about? Love?
No, I don't think so.
But?

Jude wanted to shake his head, no he did not really know if that was possible or if he could believe something like that. Love was not in play here, he did not think so. He was clear-headed and he could see this arrangement for what it was; a cheap means to get what he wanted, just a matter of simple convenience. And it was something that was both ways, he was a man looking for a place to lay his head and for a woman to have sex with, and she was a guilty whore looking for someone to hook up with just to feel she was not a whore (or probably to tell herself she was not one). That was what his cool head told him, that this was all happening because she was a cheap slot who was ready to accept anything that could fit in that hole. Yes, and all the other reasons.

But was that it? He did not know, and his cool head was sounding more and more like Niba most of times and he was not totally in love with that cool clear head. It saw the world only in its own single color. For what was there to prove that she was cheap? Did the fact that she was a slot hole ready to accept money for a sex session mean she was cheap? And was he even paying her a coin? No, that was the answer. Then why did she bother with him? Even if she was a guilty whore as his cool head wanted to tell him, why had she not hooked up with somebody else? Why was she still ready to accept him even after all what had happened in the past? Even after...

Love?

What was that word really?

I don't...

It was complicated, something he could not lay a finger on. It was just happening and there was nothing he could do about it.

You can't be telling me you love her or something like that. You can't be telling me that she loves you, man. Jesus, can you even listen to yourself? Can you even hear yourself?

No!

Then why...

I don't know!

But she had said that word to him, she had actually...

"I love you," she had suddenly said one day to him, not looking at him, the air in the room suddenly going still and heavy. It had been one of those days after that evening, that evening when he had crawled back into her lair and somehow had become not just a regular but a presence that was almost existing just to be there in her lair (and trying to prove to himself or to the world that what had almost happened to him in that hotel room had all been a dream from another dimension and nothing that could touch his world. It was like coming to her was going to wipe that page of already written history and make it all white as if it had never happened or *just trying to tell himself that he was not that thing, that horrible thing that Eric and his friend wanted him to be, that horrible thing he did not want to think about that Eric had wanted him to be*). He had just been appearing there at her door almost like a programmed robot every blessed evening before she would leave for her nighttime job. He would drop in and without a word or two they would shed their clothes and jump into bed, she simply satisfying the hunger in him and he accepting her duty wholeheartedly. It was a simple arrangement with the only problem being that constant after-the-act guilt that came when he was spent and trying to dress hastily and leave the murky room as if it was some dungeon that could completely lock and seal him in forever if he delayed another minute.

But that day, she had changed the pattern with just three nervously spoken words, "I love you."

The word had felt like a heavy slap. Not a slap at his cheek, and not a painful slap, but a slap at his heart, a painless slap whose effect was to stop his heart in the middle of a beat. It was a slap that completely paralyzed him in place leaving only a few senses to continue functioning. His limbs were lifeless as he stood with his clothes in his hands, and suddenly he felt a fat lump rise slowly to his throat, a painful lump that was trying to stop him from breathing. He swallowed that lump hard, the sound of it going down reaching his ears and escaping into the still air of the room.

"I love you," she said again looking down at her hands. She was still sitting on the bed, still naked, her legs coiled beneath her.

Jude felt like he was going to drop and disappear, drop to the floor and just melt and disappear. Love? He had never thought of the word, not in a

way that included him and not in this particular case that involved him and Mabel. No, Mabel was just an alternative to his hand (like masturbating with a vagina), not someone he could have any emotional involvement with (whatever that means). Mabel had her own world, a world he could only exist in briefly, and then disappear. It was a simple arrangement, but now... It was just something he was not capable of thinking about. He did not want to be in the room or look at her, he just wanted to turn and run. But he was standing in place, the words having transformed him into a statue, his clothes in his hands and not knowing what to say.

“It’s true, I do,” she said again.

Jude discovered he was sweating; his armpits growing wet enough to let out tiny streams of sweat that rolled down his skin. He was making an effort to even breathe, for the air was only growing heavier and heavier, pressing down on him. He was simply going to choke, suffocate and drop to the floor.

He opened his mouth to say something, not really knowing what he could say, but nothing came out. His mouth was dry and felt like it had spent a year in the mouth of a furnace. He closed his mouth and swallowed nothing, feeling his throat hurt as it made the effort.

“You don’t have to say anything,” she said.

Jude opened his mouth again and she turned for the first time and looked at him, a sad smile on her plain face, a smile that touched Jude deep inside his heart, “I...” Jude tried.

“You don’t have to say anything,” she said again, “I just wanted you to know how I feel about you.”

And slowly without any conscious effort the air around the room had started growing lighter, his breathing starting to comeback normally, his heart slowly trying to come back to life and awaking other senses. He found himself succumbing to a hard embrace, an embrace that totally awakened him. Before he could think or say a word, he was already making love to her, this time not just having a session with a vagina aiding him to relief some pressure, but actually making love to her. It was slow, careful and free of all the selfishness and hollowness, all that was present was a burning passion and a longing he had never known existed. They exploded in each other’s arms as they reached climax for the first time in both their lives and lay there

in bed holding each other and shivering till she whispered softly into his ear, tears of a strange joy flowing down her cheeks, "I love you."

And he had whispered something back, something that he could no longer remember, but something that had kept her happy and the flame burning.

"You believed her?" Niba had asked him still shaking his head in disbelief.

"I don't know, but she was serious."

"Love? Jesus, man, don't be telling me you believe that."

"What's wrong with believing her?"

"A lot, man, a lot."

A lot like what?

That was the issue, what was wrong with her loving him? Jude shrugged; he could not see anything wrong with that. She was the first woman in this world (well apart from his mother who had actually never used those words with him), who had said something like that to him. It had surprised him, that was the truth, surprised him almost out of his skin, but now he could understand it. He could understand the fact that she had meant it when she had said those words, and he could understand the way he felt about her (and at times the reason why he was now lying in her bed and actually feeling comfortable about it).

"She was genuine," he whispered to the ceiling.

And if the Eric thing had not happened...

Jude closed his eyes, he did not want to go to that locked section of his brain, did not want to remember the feel of that soft hand on his cheek or the smell of that strong perfume. It was the past; the past and he did not want to think about it or ever think about it. Eric was history, a history he was even going to erase and make sure he could believe it had not actually happened.

But it had been because of that evening...that evening that Eric had orchestrated, that horrible evening that had led him back to her door and had made him realize certain things.

He opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling again.

So somehow, something truly genuine had come out of that wet and horrible evening...

“I don’t want to think about it,” he whispered to the ceiling knowing that thinking about it was going to completely shatter his peaceful morning.

He closed his eyes tightly this time, trying to shut out that thought.

It’s okay.

Sometime later he found himself thinking, the peaceful tranquility swallowing him again.

It’s okay and everything’s going to work out well from this point onward. I’m going to do it, my own way.

Yes, everything was going to come out alright, now that he was here.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Jude turned his face to the door of the room as it opened suddenly and Mabel walked into the room holding a small black plastic shopping bag in her hand. He could make out a piece of bread inside the shopping bag, just the shape of it, but it was unmistakable. Suddenly he felt hungry.

“Finally,” she said with a smile.

“And what do you mean by that?”

She shrugged.

“Don’t I have the right to sleep?”

She dropped the shopping bag and looked at him, “What time is it?”

“I’m learning to be lazy.”

“You’ll learn that precious profession only out of here and where I can’t see you or even hear about you,” she said and they both laughed. “Do you want some fried eggs?” she asked after the laughter.

“That sounds great,” Jude yawned stretching in the bed. It was grand to have a woman around, a woman who was ready to take care of everyone of his needs. This was a dream come true, even if it was a dream he had never thought was possible.

It’s not too bad.

“You should’ve asked me for money,” he said.

“It wasn’t necessary, I still have some money.”

She was also good at saving money. She was not the extravagant types who always made sure any dime that entered their hand filtered through in a hurry. And that was great; exactly what a woman was supposed to be.

“Are you going to get out of that bed?” she asked getting ready to prepare breakfast.

“Yes, ma’am, anything you want me to do.”

He got out of the bed and yawned again, stretching himself and feeling his joints crack and creak. It was a beautiful sound to hear, he told himself, just like the sound of Mabel starting to prepare breakfast. It was just another great morning and it was going to be a great day just like the others. Things were happening, and changes were taking place all around his life...

Yes, things were happening, things were changing and he was liking those changes. It was a new life, a new life that was made up of a lot of good stuff. The constant smile Mabel was now capable of flashing him at anytime she walked into the room, the light in her eyes that was able to give some real life to her sad eyes and the touch of her hand at every time she walked pass him, that was all something. In fact the murky and damp smelly room now had a new life. And the idea that somehow he was the cause for these changes was something too. It was simple, it was all because she knew she was no longer ever going to stand in the cold and wait for some drunk client, the fact that she knew it was time for her to start forgetting that old nasty and cold life and start thinking about a new life. And the miracle was the short time it had taken him to achieve all that...

Just after the first pay.

Yes, all those changes had started after he had collected his first pay...

"I'm happy," he could still see her saying to him that night after he had told her that it was no longer necessary for her to go out in the cold and wait by the street side for a client. He had told her that he was now capable of taking care of the rents and the bills and not only that but a lot more. "I can make enough for the two of us to manage without needing anything or anybody," he had told her, spreading the banknotes before her, his own heart still pounding like a locomotive engine at every sight of the money, "I'm going to make more, I now know how to do everything necessary..."

"I'm happy," she had said again her voice sounding a little guarded like she was trying to keep something inside after a while, when the babbling had dried out of his mouth. She took his hand in her hand as they sat on her bed, "I know it's hard for you but I'm happy."

"It's not hard on me," he said, "You'll never go out there again, ever. I promise you that."

She sat for a while looking at his hand in her hand, then looked up at him a small worried look on her face and a confused smile that was all sad again, "Are you sure?"

Jude nodded.

"You know, I don't want you to..."

"Look, don't worry about anything," he said, "I can do this." He wanted her to believe in him, wanted her to see things the way he was seeing things.

But she was trying to take the path of disbelief again and it was something which was probably caused by fear, the fear that this was not possible, the fear that it was only a dream that was going to end the very next day. He wanted her to believe it was not a dream, “Don’t worry about anything, I’m going to do everything possible,” he wanted to tell her, to make her see the future he was now capable of seeing.

“It’s not something honest,” she said after a while of silence.

Jude shrugged, that small feeling of guilt stealing into his heart again, “I’m not stealing from somebody,” he said slowly then looked away, “And many people are doing it, so what’s wrong with it?”

She sat quiet and chewed at the nails of her other hand.

“It’s just a means to survive,” he said.

She nodded still chewing her nails. He wanted to see the look of happiness in her eyes, wanted to see it and not just hear her tell him in a guarded voice that she was happy.

“Look, Niba has been doing it for years now,” he said, “It’s nothing wrong, there’s nothing wrong about it. No one is ever going to catch anybody, in fact no one even cares.”

“Niba?”

Jude nodded, why was it that she could not see how harmless all of this was and just relax and be happy about it?

“Your friend?”

“Yes.”

“He’s making you do this?”

“No, he’s only teaching me,” Jude said starting to feel a tiny wave of anger. But he knew she was just trying to be modest and over protective, trying to prevent him from doing something that she thought was not very legal. Granted, she was happy to stay home and not go out and hunt for men, but she did not want him to make that possible by going to dangerous lengths. The only thing she did not know was that there was nothing dangerous about the length. That it was really not a problem, “There’s nothing to worry about,” he said.

“If you say so, then I believe you,” she said and smiled at him this time trying to put some life in the smile, then squeezed his hand and said, “You’ll have to promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“That you’ll not become like all the scammers I know and forget about your plans for the future.”

“I’ll never forget about that and you know it,” Jude said, “This is just a temporal thing.”

“Thank you,” she embraced him and somehow he had felt tears coming to his eyes. He had blinked them away without knowing where they had come from or why they had come.

Still another positive outcome.

Shut up!

Temporal or not, he could feel the positivity of what he was doing. He was not only helping another soul, but was keeping eggs in a basket that would help him in future. It was that feeling, that feeling that financially he could manage to have a future that he had always longed for, and it was a great feeling. It was just like knowing that everything you ever dreamt of was possible...

“Why didn’t I start this since?” he had wondered one day sitting with Niba.

“Because you were not yet ready,” Niba replied and said with a laugh, “You were waiting for your friend to come and open your eyes.”

Hate it as much as he did to admit that, he felt it was actually true. It was like he had had some scales over his eyes, scales that were blocking him from seeing life the way it was, and that the appearance of Eric in his life had made those scales to drop.

No, not his appearance but what had almost happened that evening...

“What’re you going to do today?” she asked after they had eaten the breakfast.

“I don’t know yet, lie around for a while.”

“Be serious.”

“I’ll go and see Niba in the evening and see if I can do some work.”

“But before that?”

He shrugged, “Nothing, I’ll just sit around.” He looked at her, “Why are you asking?”

“I don’t know,” she said and looked at him with eyes that told him she had something in her mind, something which she knew was not exactly going to sound great to him.

“What’s the problem?”

“I was thinking about your brother,” she said, “You can go and see him today.”

“What for?” *why on earth would I want to go and see Derrick? To listen to him tell me what a disgrace I was? To listen to him tell me how stupid I was, how foolish my choices were? No, that was not possible;* he had left that life and all he wanted to do was live his new life without thinking about that old life.

“Because he’s your brother,” she said, “And because he’s worried about you.”

He knew she was feeling guilty, feeling guilty as if she had been the cause of him leaving Derrick’s house. It was a natural feeling.

“You don’t know him.” And you don’t have to feel guilty, he wanted to tell her, but he only shook his head and said again, “You don’t know him.”

“Whatever you think or say, he’s still your brother and he’s going to always be your brother.”

Jude shrugged. She had read the messages Derrick had sent him, but she did not know how fictitious those messages were. She did not know Derrick’s specialty. Jude shook his head again.

What was he going to talk with Derrick about? Huh? What was there really for the two of them to talk about? How his new life was going? What a failure he was staying with a prostitute and under her roof? How totally lost and worthless he was?

And the money...

That was something he did not want to listen to. And he knew it was all that Derrick was capable of, all that Derrick was good at when it was not being scared to death of *the dragon lady*. It was only going to be another session of sitting quiet and listening to Derrick rebuke him in his always patronizing voice. And he did not want that, even if there were messages in his phone from Derrick that claimed otherwise, that claimed he only wanted to know he was okay and alive.

No, Jude shook his head, but when he looked at her and saw the look in her eyes he said, “I’ll try.”

“Don’t only try, go and see him.”

He thought for a while and nodded, Derrick was still his brother and he could not totally say he did not feel bad from time to time just taking off like that again. Derrick had been there for him as a brother in many occasions; the only problem was that he had reached a point where it was impossible to stay under the same roof with Derrick again. A point when he could no longer bear the patronizing. But even after that there was no point in trying to totally blackout the idea of talking to Derrick...

“I’ll go and see him.”

“When?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll go and see him.”

But not in his house.

Chapter Thirty-nine

I'm never going back there.

He had made that resolution and he intended to keep it. Just the thought of walking back into Derrick's house was enough to tear through his heart and divide it into two and sprinkle those seeds of guilt again in the torn heart. It was not the thought of the screaming child nor *the dragon lady* and her sharp tongue, but it was something else, something else he did not actually want to think about... hot flaming guilt. But at the end of most days he told himself that it had been time to leave, and that he had left because he had had enough of the sad drama. The sad drama that for a time had had no sort of excitement but just the monotony of the boring acts and scenes. And during those times, he told himself that no one would've even stayed there for the length of time he did.

"You tried, man," Niba would always say, "I couldn't have stayed for a minute in that prison."

But he had stayed, stayed and watched the drama till the drama had just become a monotonous bore, a nostalgic everyday movie, with the same actors standing at the same landscape, repeating the same lines and the same pitiful soundtrack playing in the background. But even as he told himself most of the days that the monotonous drama had sent him packing, he knew it was just a well oiled lie.

The truth was that one day the coin had suddenly turned and he had seen his face on that side facing up at the sky, a face that he could no longer bear to look at while living under the same roof with Derrick.

It had been pure guilt!

Yes, it was that guilt and having to listen day after day to Derrick's constant murmuring, and seeing that look of pure defeat and disappointment on his face. The murmuring had started after the results of the recruitment examination which he was supposed to have registered and written were out and his name was not among the successful candidates, "I can't believe it," Derrick had kept murmuring the constant look of defeat and disappointment taking hold of his face. Jude had felt a hurt he had never felt looking at that face; that face that said it was already tired and did no longer know what else

to do. That face filled with disappointment had kept haunting him even as he tried to tell himself that it was okay, that it was going to pass for he had known that face would be there when he had used the money destined for the recruitment examination for his own evil deeds. He had known Derrick would feel hurt just as always when the results would be out and he would not be successful. But somehow, he had not foreseen that that look and the murmuring would affect him to that extent. "I can't believe it," and Derrick had kept murmuring shaking his head, the patronizing side of him gone and only that disappointment taking hold of his normally solid face. It was that murmuring and the look of pure disappointment that had planted the tiny seeds of guilt in his heart. The tiny seeds of guilt that had started growing as the days went by and the murmuring and disappointed look continued, growing and sending deep roots into his heart. Then the guilt had blossomed one night as he had tried to sneak his way into the house one evening. *The dragon lady* had caused that guilt to blossom just by making a quiet innocent sounding statement almost to no one, "Are you even sure he used the money to compile the documents?"

"What did you say?" Derrick had asked his eyes glued to the television screen as it was always the case when there was a cease fire between them and they wanted to create an image of a perfect couple (another act of the sad monotonous drama).

Jude had stopped in place every fiber of nerve in his body suddenly going dead. The only thing that had not been dead in his body that evening had been his heart, his heart that had started pounding noisily in his chest like a sledge hammer.

"Nothing," she had said.

But it had not been nothing and he had heard her well enough. That night, he had stared at the ceiling unable to sleep, watching the guilt blossom before his eyes. Then in the morning, Derrick had walked into his room, sat on his bed and looked at him for a while in silence with eyes that looked completely tired and weary. Eyes that said he was tired of the burden and did no longer know the next step to take. Eyes that said he knew something that was making him weary, something that was making him sick in the pit of his stomach. Jude had sat up looking at him and waiting for him to say the words, to ask him if it was all true, but instead Derrick had asked him in an

equally tired voice totally free of the patronizing edge, “What’re we going to do now?”

They had sat in silence for a while looking at each other, Jude listening to his heart pounding in his chest and feeling the blossomed guilt hanging heavily from his shoulders. Then Derrick had yawned and said, “I was sure you were going to succeed this time, they were taking a lot of people,” Derrick ran a hand over his tired looking face and said, “Now I don’t know what we’re going to do.” He had stood up and left the room without saying another word.

A week later, Jude had left the house without saying a word to Derrick or anyone.

“I’ll go see him,” he told Mabel again, suddenly feeling the full weight of that blossomed guilt on his shoulders again. He had acted like a madman, walking out of the house without saying a word to Derrick, acted like a madman and proven that all the suspicions that might have lingered somewhere in Derrick’s mind were true. But he was still certain that had been the right thing to do, for he was sure he would have gone mad in that house just listening to Derrick murmur and seeing that tired and disappointed look on his face. He would’ve gone mad seeing that he was the cause of all that disappointment, and that it was his stupidity that had led to that disappointment.

And here you’re again!

Did Derrick suspect it was because of the same woman he was now living with that the money had taken a different path? Words move fast, he wanted to believe Derrick knew that.

“That’ll be good,” Mabel said.

I don’t know about that.

Chapter Forty

“How’s your friend?” Niba asked pretending to look at the computer screen before him, but looking at him with the corner of his eyes, a smile on his lips, “Has he called you yet?”

“What friend?” Jude asked knowing full well who Niba was talking about. It was one of the points these days that seemed to interest his diabolic mind, and hate it as much as Jude did, he knew there was no way of stopping Niba. To Niba it was just another way of breaking the day to day monotony of pounding at computer keyboards, a way to bring some life into the quiet cyber café even if it was by teasing the part of his brain that he had been trying hard to seal up.

“Your friend,” Niba insisted, the fingers of his left hand drumming on the bench before him. He hummed for a while and clicked the mouse he was holding in his right hand and started scrolling down a page on the screen then turned back to Jude, “Hey man, don’t be telling me you’ve forgotten about your good friend.”

“I don’t have any friend and I’ve forgotten nobody.”

Niba laughed totally enjoying the fact that he was toying with him, “Come on, man, he’s your friend.”

“Who’re we talking about?”

Niba laughed again letting go of the mouse he was holding in his right hand. The cursor on the screen stopped on the face of a chubby-looking puppy on the screen. It was a white puppy, a bright colored picture of a puppy which looked attractive enough to even touch the heart of someone who was not exactly a dog lover. The problem was that Jude did not know if there was any place in Africa where anyone could see such a puppy in real life. It was one of the things which looked funny to him, the fact that an American or a European would pay for a dog breed to an African when that dog breed could not be seen anywhere in Africa...

“That’s why they’re junks,” Niba had told him when he had commented about the irony of the matter, “They just appear intelligent on the television screen, but they’re junks who fall anytime you conduct them well.”

But today, Niba was not talking about the foolish white people who were always ready to pay for ghost puppies. He was still talking trying to tease Jude some more, "Come on man, just because your friend is a homo doesn't mean he's not your friend," Niba was saying still laughing.

"He's not my friend."

"Yes he's."

"He's not."

"Don't be shy."

"I'm not shy."

"Then admit he's your friend."

"Can you just shut up and concentrate on what you're doing?"

"Yes, sir," Niba laughed, "Pédé," he murmured before turning back to the computer.

He always wondered what Niba found so funny about the whole business that had almost taken place that evening, or why Niba thought it was a good idea to keep teasing him about it. Somehow it seemed like Niba could not see how horrible the whole business had been or the type of pit he had almost got himself into. To Niba it was a joke, but it had not been a joke, there had been nothing funny about that soft voice or that touch on his cheek or the perfume that he could still smell when he thought about it or the hotel room and the thick wool carpet on the floor...

No, it had all been real, and he did not like to think about it.

But why not?

I don't want to think about it, that's all.

But...

Jude closed his eyes feeling the familiar nauseous feeling, the feeling that was now faint but that had been there in force that evening in that hotel room and a long time afterward, when the cat had jumped out of the bag. It was that nauseous feeling that came with the smell of that perfume that might've been sweet once but that now was horrible; and that image of that hotel room with the thick carpet on the floor almost blood red in color, and the tingling on his cheek as that soft hand touched his cheeks, and that awakening down...

He had wanted to tell himself afterwards that it had all been a creation of his mind; that nothing had almost happened in room. He had wanted to tell

himself he had only been dreaming or imagining things that did not exist, or that it had all been a joke that he had totally misunderstood (for what else could it have been?). But that was always like trying to stand under the bright and hot light of the sun and telling himself he was in the dark and that it was nighttime.

It had been real, very real, just like Eric had been real and had appeared before him that one day and started planning everything...

"I can't believe he's like that," Jude had said to Niba a few days after that blessed evening, when he was able to find his voice again. The days after running away from that hotel room like a flaming flamingo had seemed to him so unreal, like something from a movie, a silent horror movie where the horror was not shown in the screen but only felt beneath the skin, "I can't believe he's like that."

"You can't believe who's like that?"

"Eric," Jude said and shook his head, "I can't believe he's like that."

"But he wanted a homo to sleep with you," Niba said then looked at him and asked, "How do you explain that? Huh? How do you explain what happened in that hotel room?"

Nothing happened!

"I don't know," Jude said, "He told me himself he had a fiancé, that he was even planning a wedding for December. He can't be like that."

Niba shrugged and took a swallow of his beer. They were in a bar that evening.

"Look, I knew him, I knew Eric back then, no, he can't be something like that."

"People change."

"Yes, but..."

"It's just a means to get money," Niba said almost matter-of-factly, as if it was the most normal thing on earth. Niba had a calm face, but somehow Jude knew it was just a mask. He too was shaken and even though he was trying to sound so normal, Jude could see through the mask. It had just been stories, just stories that he had heard sounding like fairy tales from another planet. He had never thought twice about all those stories for he had never thought one day he would be at the center of the stories, or almost becoming an actor in the story.

“It’s just a means to get money, man,” Niba said again, “They’re not homos really, I don’t think they’re homosexuals in the way the word means, but they just do it to make money.”

“But he was never like that, he was not an ambitious person...”

“People change.”

Yes, and Eric wanted him to join them in whatever pit they were in, had lured him all along to that hotel room...

You have to be ambitious...

“But who pays them after they do the act?” Jude wondered.

Niba shrugged, “I don’t know, the devil maybe.”

“I mean I don’t understand...”

“I’m not one of them,” Niba said, “I think if you had allowed the man to sleep with you you would know by now.” Niba laughed and winked at him, “I’m just kidding, man.”

The devil maybe...

That was the logical answer, for what had almost happened in the room had been something completely evil, he could feel it deep inside. It was something that he could not start to comprehend, something that was completely out of this world. For there was no reason on earth another man would want to sleep with another man.

“They wanted you to join,” Niba had offered.

But join what?

“Hey, I don’t know, man, I’m not one of them.”

He had heard about cults before and somehow he was certain it had been an initiation ritual that he had almost taken part in. His initiation into whatever Eric was in, into whatever had made Eric rich.

If you want something bad enough you...

He had almost been initiated that evening into a cult...

“Every cult has its own rituals,” Niba had told him, “Your friend was trying to make you a member, man.” Niba laughed and said, “Shit, if you had accepted now you’d have been a damn rich man.”

A cult!

And Eric had been willing to initiate him in a cult or whatever it was that gave them all the wealth. Eric had been willing to lure him into something that surely had no bottom but only a continuous pit of darkness. Ready to

make him hand his soul to something he could not understand. At times it sounded absurd when he thought about it, sounded like something from a fantasy novel or movie. But he knew it was real...Eric was the evidence of that something he could not explain, the new and altered Eric with his big cars and his clean banknotes...

I was lucky I guess.

But how lucky?

When you want something bad enough you always look for a way to get it.

But Eric had not been the type. The Eric he had known had been a totally different human being who could not have joined something so out of this world. So, how had it happened? How had someone who had been so simple and humble back then embraced something like that? Something that was so far away from the image Eric had always portrayed? Something that was beyond comprehension? It was something he could not understand. At times he wanted to believe Eric had been a victim, a simple victim. But what bothered him was how someone that was a victim of something that bad could try to lure another human being into it, and a human being who had been a friend once.

People change.

Yes, and money is the biggest temptation in this world. A temptation even the most self righteous always tend to fall into.

"People can sell anything for money, even their souls," Niba had told him and in a whisper had said, "I can even sell my mother and father if I see somebody that can pay a good price."

That was true, even the part that Niba could sell his parents. At times Jude wondered if Niba could have run out of that room.

No! Niba would've remained and become rich, he was certain of it. Actually very few people could've run out of that room and allowed a promising future and all the riches promised them.

When you want something bad enough you can do anything to get it.

But not through that means. Not even if all he had always longed for was to go back to school and continue his studies, not even if the promises were there to make all that possible for him and more. No, that was not him, he was not some fool ready to sell his soul for a better future, he was not some fool that Eric could easily lure into his circle of cultist (even if sometimes he

thought Eric had acted with some idea of actually trying to help him out in life, crazy as that might sound). No, he was not that person and he had proven it.

“Take a look at this,” Niba was saying to him.

Jude saw it was another dog on the computer screen, another chubby expensive looking species. Only his eyes saw the dog, for he was still in that hotel room, still smelling that horrible perfume and still feeling the familiar nausea.

“What do you think?”

“It’s fine,” Jude said like a robot.

“I just need to do a few modifications then put it in the website. After that we’re in business, man.”

Jude nodded. He actually wanted to shut out the memory, wanted to stop himself from remembering and seeing everything in multicolor and details.

But he could not shut it out now...

Chapter Forty-one

“Did he explain everything to you? Your friend Eric, did he explain everything to you?” the man had asked with his soft perfect voice when Jude was installed in the room.

Jude was in the room, sitting on the only couch in the hotel room, his beating heart finally calming down and the paranoia drifting away. The man before him was one of those honest looking people, a perfect face, a perfect smile and that look that make you chastise yourself for having had any flickers of paranoia.

“Hmmm? Did he?” the man asked again walking over to a small table by the bedside where Jude could see a bottle of wine and two glasses.

“Yes,” Jude nodded, I think so. What else was there to explain apart from the fact that the man was going to help him?

You think so, padre?

What else?

Jude looked at the luxurious hotel room, and that tiny voice inside asked the question again; what was the man doing in this hotel? *What's that to you?* The man was wealthy, he could see that, stupidly rich like Eric (*But that does not explain why he's in this hotel does it? And why he wanted you to meet him here, does it? Shut up!*). But the man could be someone out of town, someone who was just around for a couple of days. Yes, just somebody in transit, he wanted to believe that. *Why are you asking all that? What difference does it make?* It was just the paranoia trying to creep back into his heart, that stupid paranoia that had no place in his life now. He was here and that was what mattered. He was here and the man was just going to help him open some doors for him and open that big door to his future. That was all...

The man poured wine into a glass, but Jude was not looking at him; he was still looking around the room, the well made double bed, the carpet on the floor that was thick and blood red in color with some exotic art work on it that evoked images of Arabia and magical lamps and flying carpets. Everything about the room was exotic in Jude's eyes, exotic and perfect. The hotel room was surely expensive, he thought to himself, very expensive. Well, the man was rich enough to afford it without a sweat. And probably one day

when he too would have gone back to school and would have had a real job that paid he would afford to stay in such a place without a sweat. It was an idea that made Jude to suddenly feel happy, happy and lucky to have known somebody like Eric. It was God's plan for him, and he was grateful to God.

"You're Jude, right?" the man said handing him the glass of wine.

"Thank you," Jude said.

"So, did he explain everything to you?" the man whose name Jude remembered as Bruno asked again. He was standing before Jude and Jude could get the full whiff of that sweet smelling perfume, a perfume that he knew was surely expensive just as everything about the man. The man was wearing a pair of well tailored trousers and a fashionable looking shirt over it. But his feet were bare though he had asked Jude to keep his shoes, smiling his perfect and polite smile, "These people have cleaners. Don't worry yourself about taking off your shoes. The money I pay them for the room is enough."

"He said you could help me," Jude said and tasted the wine. He did not actually feel like drinking the wine or anything, but it would've been impolite to refuse the man's wine, a man who was going to do him a favor.

"He said that?" the man smiled and sat on the arm of the couch beside Jude. For no reason at all, Jude started feeling uncomfortable and nervous again. That cold hand of paranoia started to squeeze his brain again. He wanted to stand up and walk away from the man, "Very kind of Eric," the man said with his perfect smile still on his lips, "He can be a very naïve fellow at times, don't you think so?"

Jude nodded, "Yes."

"That's all he told you."

Jude nodded.

What was all this about?

"Well, he doesn't always tell you much," the man said and stood up, "Anyway, you're here and that's what matters really. You want some more?" the man said indicating Jude's glass of almost untouched wine.

"No, this one's okay."

"You don't have to be modest," the man smiled his perfect smile.

They were silent for a while, Jude feeling the air between them suddenly filled with charge, though he did not know where the charge was from or why it was there, and then the man said, "So you want to go to school?"

"Yes."

"That's a good thing to want to do and I'm sure Eric told you I could make it possible."

Jude nodded.

"Well that's true."

That feeling came again and it was overwhelming and Jude wanted to get up and walk out of the room. Somehow he did not want to sit there and listen to the man anymore.

Why are you so nervous?

I don't know.

Are you sure?

"I can do that for you," the man was saying, and a lot more, his eyes said.

"Thank you, sir," Jude heard himself say, "I would be very grateful."

"Oh, come on, that's nothing. Eric sent you here and that means you're alright. You understand?"

Jude did not understand and he did not like the way he was now feeling but he nodded like a robot and heard himself say, "Yes."

"You're a friend, more than a friend," the man smiled his perfect smile and said, "There's a little thing though..."

Then the cat had come out of the bag. And it was a big black cat, a scary black cat that was smiling as it jumped out of the bag on all fours and stood there before him almost wagging its tail.

The little thing, the tiny little condition which the man standing before him with his cold soft hand touching Jude's cheek was that black smiling cat. Something that sounded so simple like a joke in words, but that as was scary as hell just to think about; the man wanted to make love to him, wanted to sleep with him as if he was a woman.

"What!?"

It was a joke, Jude wanted to tell himself, it was just a twisted joke and all the man wanted was to pull his feet from under him in some sick way. It was something that could not be possible, something that could not be happening in this world, in this country, in this town. He was in a nightmare;

a nightmare that was going to end sometime soon when the man was going to suddenly laugh heartily and tell him that he was just kidding. But Jude knew it was just a lie he was trying to tell his mind, he knew what the truth was and knew that somehow he had known before even walking into the hotel room what that truth was.

“Don’t look so surprise,” the man was saying, his horrible hand on Jude’s cheek, his horrible cold and soft hand moving slowly on Jude’s cheek. Jude wanted to scream, to push that hand away and runaway, but he was paralyzed, just sitting there, the man standing before him, the man’s crotch actually just a few centimeters away from his face, “It’s a simple thing actually,” the man was saying, “A very simple thing. Just a little thing you’ll need to do and then get all what you want, everything you’ve ever wanted in this world. It’s easy.”

Jude was not breathing and he knew it. His heart was not even beating in his chest. He was a stone, a rock, a statue sitting in the couch with the glass of wine in his hand. The only part of his body that was showing any signs of motion was the hand holding the glass of wine, and the motion consisted of slowly squeezing the glass in his hand.

I’m dead.

“Come on,” the man was saying his hand doing the rhythmic movement on Jude’s cheek, “You’re a man, you have to know these little things.”

That soft cold hand on his cheek, rubbing his cheek, cold fingers touching his hair, but he felt nothing. He was a stone, a statue with only one silly thought in his head; that this was not happening. I’m not even here, I’m not in this hotel room, he wanted to believe that, but the perfume was almost choking him now and its sweet smell was now completely horrible.

“If you want to be like your friend it’s simple, very simple,” the man was saying, “You want to go to school anywhere in this planet, have anything you’ve ever wanted you just need to do this little thing and everything will be fine.” The soft cold hand was on his chin now, under his chin, “You know it and I know it, you know you want to be like your friend, you want to do things in life and be somebody. This is an opportunity for you to do it, to become what you’ve always wanted to be, an opportunity that very few people ever have.” The hand was lifting his chin, lifting his face that had been down facing the carpet on the floor up, “What do you think? Huh?”

He was now looking at that perfect face and that perfect smile, but it was all a mask he was staring at. The face was a perfectly horrible face and the smile was a perfectly horrible smile and he could see that now. It was all a mask, just like a circus clown's mask, and this particular circus clown standing before him had a lot of nasty tricks under his sleeves.

"Huh? What do you think? Are you ready?"

The glass shattered in his hand without his knowledge of how it had happened. But the sound of the shattering glass brought him out of the state of trance he had been in. He was back in the real world, the world where this was not happening, a world where the man before him did not exist.

He did not know where the force came from or the will power, but he bolted out of the couch, pushing the man away. He did not see the man fall to the floor or the look of surprise in his eyes as he fell. He was out of the room in no time even as the man was calling his name and still trying to make him see the light that was found in the bottomless pit of darkness.

Jude ran down the stairs, ran out of the lobby, his heart the only sound he could hear in his ears. He was on the road, running and not looking back, the overhead clouds now a thick blanket of charged darkness, belching out lightening after lightening. He kept on running till the dark blanket overhead started sprinkling some water, and then it was no longer a sprinkle but a downpour. He stopped then by the road side, the world spinning out of proportion, his stomach spinning along with it. He looked down at his crotch and discovered that he was having an erection, a hard and painful one, then the nausea took over completely and he got down on his knees and vomited.

Sometime later, he found himself without knowing how or why standing before Mabel's door, the rain pouring down as if it wanted to wash away the blackness of the clouds from the face of the heavens and the darkness that had been trying to engulf his soul that evening...

Chapter Forty-two

“Stupid old woman,” Niba was saying, “I’ll show her that she’s just a junk like all the others,” Niba was pounding the computer keyboard as if it was the woman herself, as if he could see her right there before him, “She thinks she’s smart, but she doesn’t know I’m a genius.” He hummed for a while still pounding on the computer keyboard, “I’ll show her something.”

Jude could see that Niba was replying a mail, trying to convince one of his potential clients (who was trying to be smart and suspicious and whom Niba had already labeled as a stupid old woman) to pay the ghost goods he was selling online, “Some of these Junks think they can stop me from getting what I want, but they don’t know me,” Niba said and smiled a little diabolic smile then continued humming and pounding on the keyboard. Jude was certain he already knew how it was going to end. If there was something Niba was good at it was convincing people online, it was one of those things, like a gift that had always been there and just waiting to be discovered. Niba was good and he knew how to turn a white man’s brain inside out till the white man was completely dependent on him like a suckling baby, ready to hand over his or her hard earned money to Niba anytime he asked them to.

He was learning, Jude knew, but he also felt he was never going to be a pro like Niba; this was not his gift. That was why he was only going to do it temporally, only do it till he found a way to go back to school...

“This is how to handle the fool,” Niba laughed and leaned back in his chair looking at the screen, “Let’s see if she’s not going to pay.”

Jude smiled.

“I’m good, man, I’m good.”

It was actually fun, Jude had discovered; not the dark illegal and immoral way to look for money as he had always thought. It was fun, better than a lot of things. Now he could see that, now he could understand why a lot of young people were spending their evenings in cyber cafés. And even if there was that idea that at the end somebody was going to lose his or her hard earned cash, he could easily live with it for that somebody was a faceless somebody...

A junk.

And anyway, this was better than what Eric had wanted to lure him into...This was far better than what had almost happen to him that evening in that hotel room...

That night after the hotel room incident had been a night he had spent as if he was seeing the world from some position up in the celestial heavens, seeing the world through a blurred screen. The screaming of the baby next door was forgotten, even if the baby had been lying in his bed and screaming its lungs out he would've laid there staring up at the ceiling without hearing the baby. All he could see and hear was the impossibility of what had happened or almost happened in that hotel room. He still could not believe he had been there and that the man called Bruno had been there with him and had said what he had said or that the man had touched him. Jude could still smell that horrible perfume even as he lay on his bed, even after he had taken a bath. *Then it was real.* But he wanted to hold onto the disbelief, to hold onto the fact that Eric had not tried to put him into a strange dark pit. But it was just wishful thinking, just whispering in the wind.

Before dawn he had gotten out of bed, took out the SIM card from his cell phone and shattered it into pieces. There was no way on earth he was ever going to get into contact with Eric again, it was over and the only way Eric could reach him was by calling, so shattering the SIM card was shattering that means.

It was in the same light that a week later he had quit his job as a sales boy in the shop. He just left without saying a word to anybody and when Derrick had asked him why, he had simply said he was tired of working in the shop and for such a small salary, that he was going to look for another job.

"I believe you were working there in the first place because it was difficult to find a better job," Derrick had said looking at him as if he was already insane.

"I'll look for another job."

"Where and what type?"

Jude shrugged, "I don't know yet."

"What's wrong with you these days?"

Jude shrugged.

And that had ended the discussion about his quitting the job at the shop and no one could've known his reason for leaving the shop, not Derrick, not Okoro, not his boss with his face that looked like that of a bulldog. And at times he suspected that even Niba did not truly know. But it had been a simple reason, just the continuation of cutting the links, of erasing any links. There was that image he had been seeing, that image of Eric walking into the shop again, this time not smiling and looking very diabolic and angry, Eric walking up to him and telling him in an icy cold voice, "What did you think? That it was easy to become rich? That it was easy to get what you've always wanted? Huh? What did you think? That money was heaven sent? You thought I could just help you with my hard earned money like that to go and study overseas for nothing?" Eric laughing in a diabolic and metallic voice, "If you thought so then you're a fool more than I thought," Shaking his head and smiling a crooked smile, "You're a fool thinking that anything in this life is free, that anything in this life is easy. Anyway, while we're at it why don't you give me back every coin I've ever given you, you stupid ingrate..."

He had left the shop because he knew deep in his heart that something like that could happen.

"I think it was a sign after all," Niba had said one day. It had been a few days after he had stopped working in the shop.

"What're you talking about?"

"Your homosexual friend," Niba said.

"Look, don't start..."

"Come on, man, you've stopped working in that stupid shop, and that happened just after him," Niba had looked at him trying to look serious, "Now you can look for something better to do."

"I don't think there's anything," Jude said, "And all I really want to do is go back to school."

"Then you can still do that."

"But how?"

"Scam some stupid junks and get enough money then go back to school," Niba said, "That's simple, I don't know why you can't see it."

"I don't want to..."

“Oh, shut up, man, it’s nothing, I’ve told you. You have to stop trying to worry yourself so much about everything in this world. You’re too serious about things, man.”

“But I don’t...”

“Or you want to be a homo?” Niba said and laughed, then patted Jude on the back, “This thing’s easy, man; I can show you how to do it. When you know how to conduct the junks you won’t ever beg anything from anybody. Look at me, man, look at me, I don’t need nobody. If I want to do anything I do it. Even if I want to buy a car, I’ll hustle and buy one. All you need to do is scam and you’ll see what I’m talking about.” He patted Jude on the back, “Forget all the stupid things you think in your head or the things people say. You’re not going to steal money from anybody.”

“I...” Jude started, still not able to come to terms with the idea of being a scammer.

“It’s better than being a homo at least,” Niba said and smiled, then looking serious once more, he said, “Come on, man, when are you ever going to grow up?”

And now here he was, sitting in this quiet almost empty cyber café, learning the tricks and already feeling like a certified scammer. Well, he was that, a certified scammer for he was already making money online. And the funny thing was that he was not really feeling any remorse about making the money by lying to faceless people about puppies and stuff that did not exist. It was going smooth and he was able to live his life without the help of anybody.

Chapter Forty-three

“Perfecto,” Niba cried looking at the computer screen, a smile eating up all his face, “A junk is a junk,” he turned to Jude and said, “This is how you handle them, don’t ever say I didn’t teach you everything.”

Somebody was going to pay, that was the only reason for Niba’s happiness.

“I was already broke,” Niba said and exhaled noisily then leaned back in his chair, “What’s four hundred dollars in our money?”

Jude calculated and said, “About one hundred and eighty thousand.”

“That’s not bad,” Niba said, “I love this thing, man. When they fall into your trap don’t ever let them go, that’s the golden rule,” he smiled, “In less than a day or two that stupid old woman will be begging me to accept her money, just wait and see.”

What always surprised Jude was the confidence that Niba had when he was dealing with a potential client. It was like he had a sixth sense that told him if a client was going to pay or not. A sixth sense that told him what to say to the client to turn his or her head around and turn the brains inside into a mass of useless gel. The clients seemed like feeble minds, feeble minds who could be turned into puppets and controlled to do whatever Niba wanted them to do. It was amazing to see it.

“I told you, man, this thing’s like child’s play.”

It looked and sounded easy when Niba was the one explaining everything to you. But Jude knew it was not a piece of cake as Niba said it was. There were issues just like with any job in this world. One of those issues was the problem of time. Sitting in a cyber café for hours upon hours and most of the time in the evening or late at night was time consuming and stressful. It was not only time consuming, but the fact that there were nights when the cyber café was not only cold but chilly was another thing to note. It was a difficult job physically even if it sounded like it was a piece of cake. And it was a difficult job mentally too, because there was need for a brain that was always inventive, a brain that could bring up new things even when there were no possibilities, a brain that could manipulate another brain into totally

believing a lie and accepting to buy that lie. And that mental aspect was more challenging even more than the physical aspect of the job...

"You've to sound totally convincing, man," Niba had explained to him, "If you're the CEO of a company you've to talk like one; if you're a doctor you've to talk like one. You must learn to sound like anyone you like."

"But how?"

"Don't worry, with time you'll see how easy all these things are."

But how was it possible to sound convincing to someone who was miles away, someone who was probably more educated and more knowledgeable than you? To assume you were something you were not, someone you were not?

"Don't worry about that," Niba had said, "When I started I had that problem too, I could not understand how that was possible, but now it's easy."

Jude could not see how all that was possible and worse easy. He could not even understand how a picture on a website could even catch the interest of anybody; worse still the picture of a silly looking puppy. What did Europeans and Americans want with the stupid dogs anyway?...

"Who cares?" Niba laughed, "The junks want their puppies and their monkeys and all the stupid things, that's all that's necessary. And the good thing is they want them strong enough to pay for them when you tell them to without too much argument."

And that was the soul of the business, selling imaginary stuff online, mostly puppies. It was funny when he thought about it, the fact that he was in Cameroon and telling a white man somewhere in Europe or America that he had a big farm that reared all sort of exotic dogs and puppies and he or she believes. Or the fact that people were posing online as honest to God business people who were selling ugly looking sculptures and traditional masks that did not exist. It was all like a big silly joke, a big silly joke that was keeping pockets filled with cash and giving some poor white fellows a lot of sleepless nights when they discovered their cherished ghost puppy was not going to come home. Granted it wasn't always huge amounts of money (at least when it was about puppies and monkeys. But when it was about traditional masks and sculptures the amounts were usually unbelievably huge), but losing money, even if it wasn't much, was not a pleasant thing. But

when you were the one gaining the money, being in a third world country with a currency that was also down the hill the small amount did not look all that small, and when you knew how to save you could suddenly find yourself with some substantial amounts of money. It was all interesting and smooth, but all it said was that he was officially a fraud, a liar...

"Many people always feel that stupid guilt when they start, man," Niba had told him, sounding like the best teacher on earth, "Even me." That was something that Jude doubted with all his heart.

But even with all that encouragement from Niba, there were times when he still felt that guilt; when he felt like what he was doing was going to one day bring only harm. It was always there when someone asked him what he was doing now, just like it had been there that afternoon when he had met with Derrick...

"So, what're you planning to do with your life now?" Derrick had asked him with a voice that was surprisingly free of any scorn or patronizing.

"I don't know yet," he had said.

But he had seen the questions in Derrick's eyes as he looked at him. He was wearing clothes that were better looking and he looked fresher and more alive. He could see the effort Derrick was making not to ask him how he was looking so well when he no longer had a job, when he was no longer living with him, but staying with a prostitute. He had seen Derrick looking at him and trying to guess the big secret.

"You know I worry about you," Derrick had said after a while of silence, his voice still sounding completely unlike the Derrick he had always known, "I do worry about you."

Jude had not said anything, but had felt only that guilt, that hot burning guilt on his face. What was he doing with his life? What was he trying to do? What was he doing lying to innocent people he did not even know just to take away their hard earned money? Was he trying to prove something? And what would Derrick say or think if he told Derrick that was his line of work now?

Don't worry about Derrick; you know what you want out of it.

But he could not just stop thinking about what Derrick would think, how Derrick would react if such information got into his ears.

No, I'm just trying to survive. I'm just trying to make some money and chase my dreams so that I'll stop feeling worthless all the time, so that Derrick would see what I had always wanted and understand that it was better than trying to force me to do things I didn't like, so that...

After a while of awkward silence, Derrick had said in a sad voice, a voice Jude had never heard before, "Well, I believe you're already old enough to know what you want and what's right from wrong," he had looked at Jude with eyes that were suddenly filled with a pain Jude could not comprehend, "All I want you to do is to be careful, that's all. I've my own problems."

Jude had waited for more, waited to listen to whatever problems Derrick had, but Derrick had said nothing else, then suddenly Jude had discovered the pain Derrick was going through; the pain that was now so great Derrick was even almost at the point of confiding in him. That was not Derrick, he told himself feeling warm tears start to rise to his eyes, hating the world and hating himself for somehow contributing to that pain. He should not have left, they should've been more open to each other and support each other if only to chase the demons away...

But it was too late.

"I'm a genius," Niba said again reading a new mail, his face lighting up again. It was one of the things he was now used to, the fact that Niba was capable of telling him more than fifty times in one evening that he was a genius and the exaggerated confidence that came along with it. A confidence which was so exaggerated that one day Niba had told him that he could even turn the American president into a junk if they exchanged just two mails, *Imagine how that can be, man*. "It's easy, all I need from a junk is for that junk to show interest and write me a mail, then it's over."

And how was that possible?

"How can you do that?" he had asked Niba the first day they had been together in a cyber café. Then he had been looking around at the quiet almost empty cyber café with the eyes of a novice, a novice who was still an unbeliever in the new gospel that was written by people like Niba. It had all sounded surreal to him at first as Niba had explained things to him, "It's as simple as ABC, I've told you the only thing you need is for the junk to show interest and write to you when he sees what you're selling," Niba had said, "The biggest problem is to set up a business that is attractive enough, but

don't worry about that, I'm a pro and I'll set them up for you. If the business is attractive enough you'll get many junks trying to buy from you and that's when you use your brain and conduct them till they'll be dripping saliva and ready to give you all their money even when you're not asking them to." Niba laughed as he saw the disbelief in his eyes, "Oh, don't worry you'll see how easy this thing is. Well, I know at times you'll need to pray for the junks to see your website," he laughed again, "But don't worry about that, God's always answering that prayer, there are a lot of junks in the internet, more than anybody can handle." Niba laughed jovially and said, "One thing, when they pay, you have to thank them and give them a lot of hope."

"And then you stop communicating with them?"

"It depends on the type of junk. Let me tell you, man, some of them can get angry when they discover they have been scammed," Niba laughed remembering some incident from the past, "There was this junk, I scammed the fool and he sent me a mail and told me he was going to come with the FBI and look for me wherever I was hiding in Africa."

"And what did you do?"

"I wrote back and told him that I was with my witch doctor, and that if he attempted to set his feet on African soil I was going to change him into a black man."

"And what did he do?"

"Nothing, he didn't write another mail again."

It was a funny game, Jude had to admit.

It really just boiled down to the simple aspect of creating an imaginary business online, something that was just fake, then making sure it was attractive enough for some poor fellow to be interested in. After that all that was left was to communicate with that poor fellow and to sound convincing enough that the poor fellow would completely believe the legitimacy of the fake business and what he was already discovering was not even a problem. Everything came with time, just as Niba had been telling him from the beginning. All that was necessary was to start.

Where there was a problem these days was when it came to payment. Getting a potential client to believe you did not automatically mean that everything was on the floor. Granted there were junks who did not complicate, who were so blind that even if the word "caution" was printed in

capital letters and hanging from their eyelids, they would still not see it. But it was becoming a problem to convince some junk in Europe or America to send money to Africa through any of the available international money transfer agencies. The agencies themselves were becoming a problem, always trying to sensitize the junks and put them in the light about the fake businesses that were existing these days. It was becoming a big problem these days and even natural pros like Niba were feeling it, "Well, what can we do, man? We just have to manage with what we have," Niba would say then after a while, an idea would come to his head and he would start screaming that he was a genius.

The ideas Niba had were simple when he explained them. He had a cousin in the United States of America and Niba was sure he could convince the man to work with him, "I can promise him a percentage after every deal, I know he's a broke man so he'll be happy to get some easy bucks," Niba would say with a smile lighting his face, "The fool has never sent anybody anything since he went there." The idea was to convince his cousin to create pay pal accounts, accounts whose addresses were in the United States of America, addresses that looked very genuine. Then when he would be creating his business he would create them and base them in towns where those addresses were found, "It'll be easy, man, I can already see it." The junks will not be very suspicious about such businesses because they'll look like genuine American businesses. And when the junks pay for their goods, his cousin will withdraw the money in cash and send his own share and close the business if necessary, "I can even expand the deal, look for people in other countries who'd be willing to work with me, in fact I think when you go to school you'll work with me."

It was an idea that Jude always found amusing, but something he was not very sure could work. Well, but Niba was good at thinking about things like that, just like the one time when Niba had told him that he was planning to hack the computer system of a money transfer agency so that he could send himself money and collect it anytime he wanted some money.

"How do you think about these things?" he had asked Niba once.

Niba had shrugged, "I don't know, God made me that way."

"So, how's the school thing going?" Niba asked his hands folded behind his head, looking at the computer screen.

“What?”

“The school thing, your school thing; you told me you heard about some people...”

“Oh, that,” Jude said, “I’m still looking into it.”

“But what do you think about them?”

“I don’t know what to think yet, but they sound reliable.”

They sat for a while in silence, and then Niba asked, “Hope you’re keeping your money.”

“What else would I be doing with it?” Jude asked knowing what was coming next.

“I think you know, man,” Niba smiled at him, now it was time to get under his skin again with the picture of Mabel the way Niba saw her.

“She’s not like that,” he said quietly, repeating himself for the hundredth time and knowing that it was not the last time he was going to do that.

“Yes, yes, I’ve heard that before, they’re never always like that.”

Jude looked at the computer screen before him, he had some mails he had to reply and some pictures of silly looking puppies to put up, and it was time to change the topic anyway, “How do I copy this picture and paste it here?” he asked.

“I’ve told you that more than one million times,” Niba said taking the mouse from him, “What’s wrong with you?”

Chapter Forty-four

The insinuations had almost gotten to him in the beginning. He had found himself asking himself the question “what if”, his mind opening up and listening more and more to what Niba had to say about trusting a woman and a prostitute for that matter. But somehow he had been able to put those insinuations and the questions to rest. No, not him actually, she had been able to put them to rest all by herself.

It had been a normal feeling that first time, something anybody could’ve done in his shoes, touching so much money for the first time. The money had almost gotten into his head.

Money can do that to any man.

And how much money had it been? It had been about two hundred thousand, an amount that looked not that much to him now, but that had been something big and not only just big but impossible to comprehend a month ago. It had been his first payment, his welcome gift into the folds of the scammers.

“This is nothing, man,” Niba had said to him with a laugh, “Just chicken change.”

But he had been shivering like a sick dog as the money had been counted before him, clean banknotes that had looked like nobody had ever touched them, clean banknotes that were all his and that he did not have to thank someone or feel small before someone for giving him. It was his money, money that he had worked for, and he knew more was going to come, more and more and more...

He had wanted to do something special, had wanted to show something for it.

Money can do that to any man.

“We’ll change this room, everything in it,” he had told Mabel the words rolling out of his mouth as if they would hurt him if he did not keep them rolling out. It had been after he had told her that she was never going to go out standing in the streets again. All he wanted that day had been to just do something big, and so the words had kept flowing out of his mouth almost without any conscious thoughts, “We can do a lot of things here,” the money

was lying before them, clean banknotes that still gave his heart a missed beat anytime he looked at them, “We can even look for a new one, a bigger room or even an apartment. It’s easy, we can...”

“Jude?” Mabel had said quietly, her hand finding his again and taking it in a grip that halted his babbling for a few seconds.

“Look I’ve...” he started again.

“Are you sure you’re in your senses?” she smiled at him, the shadow that was in her eyes when he had been trying to convince her about stopping her profession completely gone.

“I’m fine, I’m just trying to make things better,” he said. That was all he wanted, and the money was there and not only that the money was out there and he was going to go out and get more. He could not understand why she was not seeing the need for all the changes that he wanted, he could not understand why she did not want the luxury that the money could bring them, “Look all I want is for us to at least be happy about this,” he said.

“I’m happy,” she said.

“Then why?...”

“It’s true, I’m happy, even more than happy,” she said, “But you’re thinking too fast and forgetting the important things.”

“What’s that?”

“You just promised me you’ll not forget your future...”

“I cannot...”

“You already are if you start trying to do all the things you’re talking about.”

He was silent for a while, what she had said sinking in, and then he said a little less enthusiastic, “It’s just that, here...now...we can make this place habitable.”

“It’s habitable,” she said a little hurt.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying it’s not habitable. It’s just that...I wanted it to be...I don’t know...I wanted to...”

“I know what you want to do, but that’s not very important right now. There are important things and you know it. Your future is more important than any room,” she said, “And that’s the only thing you’re going to think about.” And without asking him or saying anything more she had collected the money and designated herself as the protector of his money.

But Niba had found that totally insane when he had told him about it, “You’re out of your mind, you’re totally stupid,” he had said not believing what Jude was telling him, “What’s wrong with you? Jesus, you’re stupid.”

“I’m not stupid.”

“Yes you’re. Only a stupid fool like you can even think of something like that. How can you allow a woman to do that to you?”

“I’m not stupid.”

“Yes, you’re. Who on this earth can give his hard earned money to a girl to keep? Huh? Can you tell me that?” Niba laughed, “Come on, man, what’s wrong with you?”

“She’s not what you think.”

“She’s a prostitute.”

“So what!?”

“She’s a prostitute and all she knows is to fool people like you and...”

“Look...”

“Who cares what you think? It’s in her blood; once a prostitute, always a prostitute. You shouldn’t even have told her about the money. She’s going to make you see her as the best person who has ever existed in this world, Virgin Mary, but one day you’ll discover what she’s capable of, and that’ll be when you’re completely empty handed.”

He had almost punched Niba that day, had come this close to punching Niba in the mouth and kicking his teeth out of his mouth when he was on the ground. But slowly he had calmed himself down and said quietly to Niba, “She’s not like that.”

“That’s how they always appear before they destroy you,” Niba said, “Always never like that.”

Well, he could not actually blame Niba for the way he saw her. It was in the genes of every human being, the righteous beings who saw the world only in black and white. It was a way that they were always going to see her and it was not going to change, not today, not tomorrow. She was a prostitute and that was all the world could see. It was written on her face and on her life’s book in big letters and that was what anybody looking at her was ever going to read. A prostitute who deserved nothing, a prostitute who deserved no trust, a prostitute who was never going to find redemption. She had slept with the two of them one night seemingly shamelessly for money

and nothing else. But what did that make her? What did that have to do with what was in her heart? And who was Niba or the world to try to see what was in her heart? What did the self righteous bastards of the world know about her? Nothing, that was the answer.

The story was always so simple; this is a bad girl, this is a bad girl and you should avoid her. Or to those with an iota of imagination it started with; once upon a time there was a girl, then she became bad. And of those who told the story circle after circle, under roof after roof, none of them cared to know or ask what made the girl bad. She was simply bad and that was the end of the story. Yes and no one cared why she was what she was or even if she wanted to be what she was. Nobody cared to know why there was a horrible stain on their completely white tiled floor, or what made that stain thick. She was bad and there was nothing to be done about that apart from the fact that she was only expected to go rotten. But that was stupid assumptions, stupid and false proclamations for every soul had a story why, every soul that had ever gone bad.

He had learned that himself, sharing a bed with her and listening to her tell him her own story...

She had been a normal girl too once, just like every other normal girl. Then the righteous of the world could've praised her day without end about her normalcy. But Mabel had been a normal girl in a family that was far, very far from normal (Just like most of the families he knew of, including his own), a family that had been constituted of her and two other siblings and a wandering mother whose specialty was getting married time and time again. And that wandering mother had been married to a man who had not been Mabel's father or the father of her two siblings. The man had been her fourth husband. Mabel had been seventeen then, in high school, still filled with the dreams that every normal girl was bound to have.

"I wanted to be a teacher when I finish school," she said to him, tears already forming on her eyelids and growing heavier and heavier as the seconds ticked by, "Or a nurse," she smiled a sad smile.

But something had happened; her mother's man had started showing a lot of interest in her, looking at her more than was appropriate (and she believed her mother had been aware of all this but had said nothing to her man, instead turning to her and turning their relationship into something

bizarre, her every word to her turning into a hot insult). The man had started with the usual tender coercing, the usual tender touch, the usual tender talks.

“At first I thought he was just being nice.”

Then one day it had happened. Her mother had travelled that day and was not due to come back that day, opening the door finally for the predator.

“He called me in their bedroom that night, I thought he wanted to send me somewhere,” she said, the tears now running down her cheeks, her lips quivering as she remembered that night and what had happened, “I couldn’t believe what he was telling me, what he wanted me to do,” she sniffed and for a moment he could see her still just seventeen and standing there helpless before a sex predator who was bent to have things his way. He could see her backing to a corner in that room, her hands raised before her in defense as that predator approached her, a look of disbelief in her eyes, “I tried to fight him...”

And she had not been strong enough and that predator had forced her into mother’s bed and had slept with her, and then kicked her out of the room with stern warning to seal her lips and never mention it to anybody. And that first time as always had not been the last time, it had continued, with the predator exploiting every opportunity they had alone, always with the force of a god who could destroy her life at any second she resisted him.

“I was dirty and I couldn’t even bear to look at my face in the mirror. I couldn’t even mention what was happening to my mother, she would not have believed me anyway.”

But her mother had caught them together one hot afternoon. And without examining the facts or even willing to listen to her, she had passed her own judgment and kicked her out of the house because she had not been ready to share her husband with any woman on earth, even if that woman was her daughter.

Before long, Mabel had found herself in a hostile town, a town that was not a place for any young girl to roam alone. The few friends that had showed her some compassion had been the very ones who had taught her the ropes of prostitution, turned her loose with the simple lesson that the only thing that mattered was surviving.

“I was already dirty, I was already a prostitute and there was no need pretending.”

But she had never liked it.

“Where’s your mother now?” Jude had asked her when the tears were no longer flowing, when the only thing left was the occasional sniffing.

“Now?”

“Yes, where’s she? Is she still with the man?”

She shook her head, “I don’t think so, I don’t care.”

She had been broken in the worst way, and was still probably broken. But she still had a heart even if that was something a lot of people could not believe.

She had a heart and it was that heart that had cured his first-time-money-in-the-hand syndrome. That heart that was always ready to turn his brain around and point him towards the right direction when he was forgetting what direction was important. It was something he was sure even Niba with his intentions could not have done that day for it had been like a madness, a whiff of craziness that had stuck on him and could’ve become permanent if she had not been there that day. He still remembered how he had felt looking at that money. It had been a feeling he could not describe, a feeling he knew he was never going to feel again (well, maybe he would when he succeeded with the school thing as Niba always called it). The only way he could try to describe the feeling was in the light that everything had seemed possible that day, everything on earth.

But now he was back on his feet, and he knew what lay ahead.

“You have to pay attention to these things, man,” Niba was saying having put up the pictures on the site for him.

Jude nodded but his mind was not on the pictures, he knew it was time to start being serious about his future.

Before they left the cyber café that night, having had a few promising potential clients (some very promising and some a little less promising), he promised himself that he was going to go check on the people he had heard of first thing the next day. It was only when you were close to people that you knew if they were genuine or not, he told himself.

It was time to start doing something right with what he was getting from this business...

Chapter Forty-five

The room, which was actually the reception, was spotless. It was a sizeable room with polished walls and white polished tiles on the floor that were polished enough to reflect the light from the fluorescent lamps hanging from the ceiling almost like it was the sun. The reflected light was almost strong enough to hurt the eyes. An array of sofas covered the one side of the room where clients could sit. The sofas were covered with leather, black leather that was as polished as the tiles on the floor. And the sofas stood on a thick wool carpet that covered that section of the floor.

It was impressive, Jude could see that.

The air in the room was fresh and almost chilly cold, evidence that it was being passed through an air conditioner. Jude felt a little chill pass through him as he breathed that air, a chill that he wanted to attribute to the air, but that he knew was not totally because of the air. It was the room, the way it looked impressive and the sense that such a room could only belong to an organization that was completely genuine, not some quacks who only wanted money and who could not actually help anybody. It was also due to the fact that he knew he was taking a real step towards his future, and this time all alone without needing help from anybody. He looked around the room again telling himself time and time again that he was in the real place, that he was in a reliable place.

He felt inferior to that room and its occupant as he walked into the room. He even wanted to take off his shoes before entering the room but the sophisticated looking girl sitting behind the receptionist desk asked him to enter before he could make any decision. She was a pretty looking woman in her early twenties, smartly dressed in a dark suit and wearing clear-lens spectacles that gave some more character to her look. She looked completely in place in the room as she sat behind the computer on the desk touching the keyboard smoothly with delicate looking fingers. He suddenly had an image of a cold and arrogant brat as he stood before her desk; an arrogant brat who was not even going to be welcoming. But she smiled up at him and said, "Good morning, sir."

“Good morning, I’m...” Jude felt himself fumbling.

“Please have a seat,” she said standing up and indicating the sofas at the other corner of the room.

“Thank you,” Jude breathed.

He wanted to take off his shoes again before stepping on the wool carpet but she said smiling a warm understanding smile, “Don’t bother about that, it’s okay.”

“My name’s Jude, Jude Maimo,” he said once he was seated, “I’m here to see the person who’s responsible...”

“That’ll be James,” she said.

“I just wanted to know how you people work,” Jude tried again.

“James will explain everything to you,” she said, “He’s with someone now in his office but it won’t be long.”

“There’s no problem, I can wait.”

“Do you mind a cup of coffee while you wait?”

“No,” he said actually meaning to say yes. Who on earth drank coffee when the sun was already up? Who even drank coffee in Cameroon? It was just one of those answers prompted by the nervousness he felt being in the room. He wanted to tell her not to worry about the coffee but before he could open his mouth to do that, she was already handing him a cup of steaming coffee.

“Thank you,” Jude said and swallowed some of the coffee, trying at the same time to swallow the nervousness he was feeling with it.

Chapter Forty-six

The office or more precisely the building (well it looked like the whole building belonged to the organization from all he could see) was a two-storey house in Cow Street. It was one of those buildings that were now appearing overnight, taking the places of some old dilapidated buildings that had stood at the position for years. It was the new phenomenon in town these days anyway, old dirty looking buildings disappearing and new, more sophisticated and pretty looking ones appearing in their place. It was called town growth.

“Where do people get the money from to construct all these houses when things are so tough?” Jude had wondered once.

“Bamilekes,” the golden reply had come back, “All these buildings you see are owned by them,” Niba had explained, “They know where the money machine is, man, you don’t clown with them. A Bamileke man can start a small business, just selling groundnuts by the roadside and two years later he would be building mansions,” Niba had shook his head in wonder as he told him that then he had said, “If a Bamileke man becomes the president of this country, I’m sure he’d even rent out part of the Unity Palace for business.”

That had been funny and they had laughed, but Jude could see they were doing a good job (if at all the new pretty buildings around town were owned by them), just like the building he was now sitting in. It was a magnificent two-storey structure and he could swear that the owner had not spared any finances to make it look like something. The walls outside were covered from bottom to top with brown shiny tiles, solid looking pillars supporting the structure and even the fence that surrounded the structure was something to look at. Jude had looked at it and decided that someone could even use just the money used on the fence to construct a nice looking house and still end up with some change.

But what impressed him much was the fact that the organization he wanted to check out was renting such a building. The building could not be cheap to rent, so if the organization was renting the building, it meant they mean business. They were not just some quack organization holing in a tiny cramped room in a cheap looking building and promising heaven when they

themselves were still in hell. This was the real thing; he had thought looking around as he had walked through the gate. Even the security guard he had met at the gate had a genuine air around him as he had greeted him politely. He wore a clean and brand new uniform which was, ironed and without any twist. Jude had noted all this with the flags flying inside the compound. There were five foreign flags; that of USA, that of Britain, that of Sweden, Germany and Belgium. Even the cars that were parked outside were serious looking cars, all still new and sparkling.

“The TV was doing this people a disservice,” Jude thought sitting in the reception and looking around. Most local TV stations had been running adverts about the organization, which was how he had heard about them in the first place. Then there were newspapers too and flyers all around town. The organization was called, Study Overseas the Easy Way. And if Jude had to grade them just by first impression, he was ready to give them a pass mark.

They looked authentic...

The previous night after having decided to go check the organization out, he had told Mabel. She listened in silence then asked him, “Have they helped other students?”

“That’s what they say in their adverts.”

“Many people say things like that in their adverts,” she had said a skeptical look coming over her face, “At times you don’t know if you can trust all these people.”

“I’ll just go and check them out and see for myself if they’re reliable. There’s no harm in that.”

“Yes, that’s a good idea.”

They had lain in bed for a while; Jude suddenly sensed a silence that was more than normal coming between the two of them.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said something in her voice betraying her.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

“Don’t you like the idea?”

“I like the idea,” she said still with that something in her voice betraying her. It was something he could not place a finger on, but something that was

there and he could feel it. Then after a while she said, "If you think they're good then I think they're good."

That had ended the discussion about his future that night, but he had felt that thing in her voice, and even sitting in the reception he could still remember that feeling.

It was just paranoia, she was just paranoid.

But he was not very sure; there had been nothing to be paranoid about. The fact that he was here did not mean that he had to go along with the people. If this felt like a scam to him or if it was too expensive there was always the idea of waiting and enrolling into the University of Buea next year. Well, that had been all he had wanted, to do the simple thing and go back to UB, but somehow Niba had kicked the idea out of his head, "Forget it, you'll go abroad and study there."

"But Buea is cheap," he had countered.

"I know, you need to show your stupid homosexual friend that even without him you can still go and study abroad," Niba had said, "Anyway, what's wrong in trying something that's better? If it doesn't work out you can still try Buea."

The idea had stuck and he had found it becoming more and more inviting as the days passed. What was the harm in trying something like that? There was none that he could see, and there was the possibility of making enough money online to attempt something like that without any fear. And also, it was a way to tell Eric to go to hell.

He smiled and took a sip of the coffee.

Sometime later, he looked up to see a young man walk out of the inner office. All he saw on the young man's face was satisfaction, that type of satisfaction that came from getting everything he had expected. Jude felt a little bad about himself because he had been having some doubts when he had decided to come, doubts that now looked foolish to him as he looked around the place.

"You can go in now," the receptionist told him and waved him to the inner office.

The man was talking on the phone when Jude entered the office. The man waved him to the client's chair, took the phone off his ear and covered

the mouthpiece with one hand and said to him, “Do sit down,” and raised a finger, “One minute.”

The man was slightly shorter than Jude, thick like a stuffed teddy bear, but not the very big types. His head was fast balding, the middle of the head already a little too shiny. Almost like a mirror, Jude thought. The man looked like a lawyer, Jude decided, but not the type of lawyer you would see in a court of law wasting his time to defend some poor criminal. No, the man looked like a corporate lawyer, the type that was involved with some big shot companies; the type that handled sophisticated deals and was paid in amounts that were only whispered in close doors. And the office was designed to have that classy feel around it, a well polished mahogany desk, a suiting swivel chair covered in equally polished black leather, a polished fitting book case behind the desk with selected titles carefully arranged in it, a flat-screen desktop computer at the desk just like the one in the reception. It was a completely classy office and Jude could suddenly feel the inferiority coming back again, he actually felt like a tiny fly that did not belong in such a classy place. He looked around at the walls where there was an array of framed pictures. He could see that most of the pictures were in foreign lands, and he could make out the man in the office in most of them. They mostly showed him with some important looking foreigners and he could see that the man was wearing a graduation robe in one of the pictures.

“Leeds University, Britain,” the man said noticing him staring at the picture. He put down the phone and smiled at Jude, “That’s a great university I tell you my friend.” He extended his hand, “The name’s James.”

Jude stood and took the hand, “Jude,” he said, “Eh...Jude Maimo.”

The man sat and breathed out looking tired suddenly, “It gets kind of busy here.”

Jude did not know what to say to that so he sat quiet.

“Coffee?”

“No thank you, sir, I’ve already had a cup.”

“Oh, Anna,” James nodded, “She never forgets. So, how can I help you Mr. Maimo?”

“Sir, I...”

“James, just call me James, it’s easier,” the man smiled.

“I want to know about the services your organization offers,” Jude said.

“There are many actually, but I think what you’re talking about is studying overseas.”

Jude nodded.

“That’s what everybody wants to know these days.”

Chapter Forty-seven

The man had a PhD from Leeds University in Britain; he made that clear to Jude. Jude felt himself being drawn to the man like a moth to a light bulb. This was a man who knew what it took to get there, a man who had been there and was back. It was impressive just listening to the man talk; Jude concluded and told himself that he was going to be like the man one day, a day that did not seem that far to him anymore.

“We work very closely with interested students,” the man who called himself James was saying, “I think the first thing we need from the student is a show of interest because it is useless trying to work with someone who’s not interested. Once a student is interested, he’ll always show initiative, I’ve learned that,” the man flashed him a smile, “Well, just coming here on your own tells me you’re interested.”

The man had been talking about the organization for a while now, in a voice that reminded Jude more and more of someone who knew everything that you needed to know. The man had started by giving him a brief history of the organization, how it was created and why, “It was just an idea I and a couple of friends had after finishing our school. We wanted to help other young people who wanted to study overseas to do so in an easy way. I know there’re a lot of young people who want to study out of this country and I know it can be difficult at times for them to do it, worst at times they don’t even know what they need to get an admission or to even start. That’s what we wanted to try and solve, all those problems that plagued students who wanted to study out and even problems that they were going to face out of the country.” They had started the organization three years ago, started creating contacts with interested Universities out of the country, “Well, in most of them I had friends who understood what I wanted to do. And we were serious about it. When you’re serious you meet a lot of serious people too, people who are willing to help serious and honest students to study without any problem.”

They had contacts with universities in many countries, the major ones being the ones with their flags flying outside the building, “But we’re expanding and creating more contacts. What we have in mind is to cover the

whole world, make sure that our students can study anywhere they want to study in this earth, any continent. It's a big dream," the man smiled. This was not the first branch office of the organization in Cameroon, there was already a branch office in Yaounde and they had plans to open more in other towns just like the one in Bamenda. The head office was in Britain, "What we've in mind is to one day go to other African countries and open branches there, but for now we want to concentrate on Cameroon." Jude could see how vast it was going to be with time, he could see them spreading throughout the whole globe even, "We almost had problems starting in this country, you know as it is with the corruption and all the bureaucracy." Jude nodded, that was the disease that was plaguing Cameroon, the problem of corruption and needless bureaucracy. But now the organization was on the march and he could not see anything that could disturb it, "We want to reach out to each and every student with a dream of studying out of this country and make them see how easy it can be, that's our main goal."

"When the student is interested, we encourage them to create a file with us, information about them and all the little things we'll need along the way," the man was saying, "Things like the field of study the student is interested in and the country him or her wants to go and study in. We give advice about that if the student is in need of advice and if the university the student decides to go to and the country are in our list, we start making arrangements. Well, it doesn't mean if the university is not in our list we can't work with the student, no we can always work with the student. The only problem will be that most of the benefits the students going to the universities we're already friendly with can enjoy will not be readily available."

Jude nodded, he understood that or thought he did.

"We don't try to pressure you to make a choice, no," the man said, "All this is free will, but I won't lie to you, it's always better when the student wants to go to a university we're already in contact with."

When the student had a file with them, they would study the student's file and try to see the possible universities where the student could easily gain admission, "The student's results are very important," the man said. I don't think I've a problem there, Jude thought, "The results need to be good, but I'm sure you already know that," the man smiled at Jude.

Jude nodded, his results were actually good and he knew from his last experience that getting admission into most of the universities abroad was not really a problem for him.

“You might be surprise to see some of the results students who claim they’re serious present to us,” the man shook his head, “It’s funny at times. Well, there are other qualities that we look at even if your results are good, but that’s not very important at the moment.”

Jude wondered for a while what those other qualities were, but decided it was not very important, he thought whatever qualities they wanted, he possessed them.

Then they talked with the student and get a choice for the university then seek for admission, “Don’t worry yourself about all this, it really means nothing for a serious young person who knows what they want.”

The important part came up then, the cake itself that the man had been icing all along in his reassuring voice that did not plan to leave anything out. It was the issue of finances, the tuition fee that the student needed and all that.

It was a real big cake, but the man made it look so understandably easy with his manner of explaining everything to him, “Tuition fees depend on the university and on the country,” the man said, “We always make sure the students know that before they start making any decision.” The idea was that there were universities where the tuition fee was something you could not even start to imagine, but there were others where the tuition fee was manageable, “I can assure you all of them are good schools, as I said it just depends on the country. Look at a country like Britain, the tuition fee there is usually high, while in some universities in Belgium it’s not that high and even in some universities in Sweden you can study for free.” But tuition fee was not all, there was also the issue of lodging and feeding and paying bills and other things that were bound to come up out there.

“But don’t be afraid, there are always schools offering scholarships out there,” the man said with a knowing smile. He himself must have surely studied through a scholarship program, Jude thought. Back in the eighties and early nineties many people had gone out on scholarships, most of them given by the Cameroon government itself. But now all that was a farfetched

dream that had died when the corruption and embezzlement disease that had taken hold of the country had come about. Now most of the scholarships were foreign scholarships and they were becoming more and more difficult to get these days. But the man was still reassuring as always, “Most of the universities we’re in contact with offer scholarship programs and I can assure you that they always favor our students.” And the scholarship programs were not all the same; there were scholarship programs that covered only tuition fee and there were others that covered tuition and even lodging, and still better ones that covered tuition, lodging and even allowances.

“Every student we work with has the potentials to get a scholarship,” the man said, “We try to make things as cheap and as easy as possible for our students.” The man concluded.

It was a long sermon, but it had been delivered as if it was meant specifically for him. Jude could see he was not a client, that he was among people who only wanted to help others. He could see the possibilities there before him just sitting there and listening to that sermon, a sermon that was carefully delivered in a very clear and understandable manner. He had wanted to ask the man sitting before him a lot of questions, but he could no longer remember any of those questions. It was like the man had answered all the questions that had been bouncing around in his head, all the questions that would have helped clarify everything for him. There was nothing left to clarify, he was among an authentic group of people who had already helped others before him.

“A lot of students have benefitted from our services,” the man said, then looking at him he said, “Do you know what’ll make me very happy, Mr. Maimo? If you too can benefit from what we have to offer.”

Now the man looked at him and said standing up, “You’re a serious young man, and you know what I’ll want you to do right now? Create a file with us, then take your time and think about all what you want.”

Chapter Forty-eight

Later, after the man had taken him into another office, this one at the second floor of the building and watch as he gave his information to a young man who created a file for him in his computer, the man handed him a brochure containing everything about the organization.

“Read the brochure, you’ll see everything you need to know inside, the schools, the programs they offer and their requirements, what we can do for you and a lot of other things.”

And before he left, the man gave him the address of the organizations blog. The blog was just a small website and it still carried every information that he needed to know about the organization, “And some of the testimonies of the students we’ve worked with. Most of them have their email addresses there on that blog and you can contact them and ask them anything that comes to mind. It’s a family,” the man said, “A big family that we want to grow bigger and bigger. Feel free to call me at anytime you have a question or write to me, my number and address are in the brochure. And I’ll advice you to check the blog and get in contact with a student who’s already overseas, you can learn a lot from them.”

When Jude walked out of the building, he discovered there were already two other potential students waiting at the reception.

That night he could not sleep as he lay in the bed beside Mabel. His head was hot with a lot of things and he knew sleep was not going to come to him easily that night...

“How did it go?” Mabel had asked him.

“Fine,” he had said, more than fine, he had wanted to add.

“Do you think you can trust them?”

Jude nodded, “Yes.” They were an authentic organization and he had listened to them and had a brochure that could throw more light to everything he wanted to know, “They’ve a lot of interesting things they can do.”

He had read the brochure completely after that, reading and making sure he stored everything he read in his brain. He had looked at the universities and the countries and the tuition fees and the scholarship programs that were

present, and then looked at the study programs offered by the universities. The programs were not a problem, the only problem he saw was in the financial issues. Some of the amounts were frightening while some looked not too frightening and there was the idea that he could get a scholarship, but the problem was that he did not know how feasible that idea was.

Then just go to Buea next year, it's easier.

Shut up!

It's not a bad idea.

This was an opportunity, he thought, an opportunity and he felt he could get it if he was serious. All he needed, he told himself was making an effort and avoiding thinking like a defeatist. He did not want to get a Sub-Saharan degree if he could avoid it. And anyway, the school abroad had several admission windows which meant he could study at anytime while he needed to spend a whole year doing nothing in order to wait for the admission window into Buea to open, and he was not really getting younger but he was getting older every passing day...

Also there was the thing about being able to get a job out there that paid some good money while he was studying, which was not possible in Cameroon. So, even if the figures he saw in the brochure were not very easy to come by, just that knowledge, knowing that if he sacrificed and went oversea to study he could even be able to get a job that could help him out was a comforting idea.

The figures are just there to frighten people who are not serious anyway.

And there was always the possibility of getting a good scholarship, a scholarship that covered everything. He thought about Belgium, some of the universities there offered very interesting scholarship programs, programs that could cover a lot. And imagine that he was able to get such a scholarship and go over there knowing that he would need nothing, and knowing he could still get a job.

He folded his hands behind his head and lay on them looking up at the ceiling, it was all possible, he thought, and even James had hinted it to him. He even thought the man liked him personally, he could still feel that remembering as the man had been telling him about the scholarship issue just before he had left the office, "I know some of the figures in the brochure will frighten you, but they are just figures. Remember what I told

you about scholarship programs, if you can get a good one all that will just seem like nothing. I want you to think about your choices, look at the schools and make a good choice.”

Belgium!

He thought he already had a choice; all that he was wondering was if Belgian universities were respected. He was sure they were, but he was going to ask James still and hear what he thought about them.

“America’s the best, man,” he could remember Niba saying to him once, “That’s a place where you can hustle.”

“I don’t want to hustle, all I want is to go to school and come back here and look for a real job,” he told the ceiling.

Another thing that occupied his mind was the very issue that had occupied his mind even as he had listened to the man talk. It had been the part he was going to play in all this and he had not hesitated to ask the man.

“How do you mean?”

“You haven’t said anything about a fee,” he had said.

The man smiled and said, “First you have to understand one thing, Mr. Maimo. We’re not a profit making organization and there’s no fixed fee that you have to pay. Do you understand that?”

Jude had nodded still not understanding.

“All what we may ask you to pay at the end of the day, which will happen only after we have your admission and we know everything’s in right order, is the necessary fee that’ll be needed to do everything possible for you to leave,” the man smiled, “You have a passport don’t you?”

Jude shook his head.

“Well, the fee you’ll pay will take care of that. Also, there’s the visa fee and the payment you have to make at the embassy to book for one and your flight and all the other little things like health insurance and all that. It might sound like so much but it’s nothing if you know what you want, and even if we don’t ask you for that fee you’ll still spend it to do all these things. The issue as always is that we try to make everything easy for our students by handling all these things ourselves.”

The man had told him that all of these things amounted most of the time to a million or over a million. And it did not involve tuition fee and all the

other things. But when the student succeeded in getting a scholarship that covered most of these things it was usually the only money the student paid.

“It’s not much, though I understand how difficult things are these days in this country. But if you know what you want from life you can take that as a necessary sacrifice that you have to make in order to get there.”

And when he looked at that amount in some understanding light, it was not that much. The only problem was that this was Cameroon and life was not only illogical in Cameroon but completely impossible to understand. A million francs in Cameroon was not an amount of money that you could just think of without feeling your feet move from under you. And even if you knew it was actually nothing when it was in your hands and you were already using it.

But he could get that money with time, he had already set up shop online and all he needed was some luck.

It was real, but there was a part of that reality that was not very real, the part that it was going to be easy. He knew it was not going to be easy. Believing otherwise was like believing he was Jesus Christ himself already here for the second coming. He was a scammer and he could make money, and hypothetically it was all possible for him to make that money, but all depended too much on luck, and even if that luck was there the amount of money the junks paid which was becoming less and less frequent as the days went by and they were growing wiser, was not very swollen. He reasoned that he would need at least seven serious junks to be able to make that amount comfortably and that was going to take a while. And one of the problems was that he did not really have that much time if he was going to work with James and the organization.

“That admission windows are fast closing,” James had told him that afternoon, “If a student is serious about being admitted this year, he or she should be ready by the end of this month.” And it was only two weeks to the end of the month, “Let me advice you my friend,” James had said to him, “Do everything possible to get admitted in this window, there are a lot of promising scholarships out there, a lot of them, and I don’t think you’ll have the same opportunity in the next admission window,” he had patted his shoulder as he had walked him out of the office, “Don’t even think about the financial constraints, thinking about that only weakens your resolve.”

Mabel turned around in bed and murmured in a typical sleepy voice, “You’re not sleeping.”

Jude said nothing, but continued to stare at the ceiling, he wish he could stop thinking about the financial issue as James had advised him. But it was a difficult thing to not think about all that. It was the only thing that he could actually think about as he lay in bed.

He sighed and closed his eyes feeling completely drained, but knowing that sleep was still a long way to come.

Chapter Forty-nine

The next day, Jude found himself in the two-storey building again. He was the first person to walk into the building that morning who was not working with the organization or a member of the organization. He felt all nervous and all shaky in his feet but somehow he knew he had to do it, somehow he knew it was the only thing he could do and that it was the right thing to do. It was the only thing his mind was capable of thinking, that and the financial burden that he had to undertake, but he was ready, he told himself. He was ready to make the journey, to do whatever was necessary to have what he has always wanted.

When you want something bad enough...

Yes, but this was something different and the sacrifice was something he was sure he could make here if he was lucky. He was going to take that first step towards his future. No, actually he had taken that first step yesterday, he reasoned, when he had created a file with the organization. Yes, he had taken that first step without even knowing it, he had decided that yesterday standing there and giving all his information with James beside him and encouraging him, it was just that he had not wanted to believe it. He wanted to laugh out loud as he walked into James' office his heart suddenly starting to beat faster than normal, his nervousness increasing at every new step.

What are you doing?

There's no harm in trying.

Are you sure?

He wanted to nod, to say he was sure of what he was doing. He had made the decision (a formal one if something like that existed) sometime during the long sleepless night, though he did not know precisely when and what he had even decided to do. All he knew was that he was ready to do it, and that was enough.

"People like you always make my day," James said to him and grabbed his sweaty hand, shaking it with a lot of enthusiasm he went on, "You're the reason that we started this organization, people like you, and you're just proving to me that it was not a bad idea at all."

Jude wanted to say something, but he did not know what to say, so he just nodded and sat quiet.

“You know what? I think you remind me of myself when I was your age,” James smiled at him and then said, “I take it you’ve made your decision.”

Jude nodded again, “Yes, I think so.”

“You read through the brochure and there’re no questions you want to be answered?”

“Yes,” he said quietly.

“Though I like your enthusiasm but I always want the student to think very well before making any decisions,” the man said, “But well, those who know what they want almost always have their decisions made before even coming here.” James looked at him and asked, “What program did you tell me you want to pursue again?”

“Chemistry, industrial chemistry.”

“That’s a great program and I think we’ll find many universities out there offering it. Have you any idea on the country you want to try?”

Jude nodded, and then told the man the country he thought he wanted to go to and why. The man nodded as he talked with the understanding of a father and then said, “I understand and I’ll tell you there’s nothing wrong with your choice, in fact Belgian universities are as good as any in the world.” The man told him about a university in Brussels which he thought was a very good university and which he thought was going to just be perfect for Jude, “Their admission window’s still open and they offer very good programs.”

Jude asked the man how long it was going to take for him to get an admission into the school and the man said, “About a week or two, maximum, two weeks and some days.”

“How long do I have to look for all the money I need?” Jude asked.

“A month, I think it’s always best to do these things as early as possible so that you can avoid all the little complications that might come if you delay.”

I can do it, Jude thought. He was sure of it, he could get more than a million in a month’s time, all that he needed was to work harder and to pray for some luck.

“You have made a good decision and an early one,” James said when he was leaving; “I can assure you that when you apply early you always have chances of getting a scholarship, and Belgian universities tend to have very interesting scholarship programs.” He saw it in the man’s eyes, something that was more than hope, something that he thought was complete assurance. The man was almost telling him not to worry that it was going to be possible to get a scholarship, even if it was not a very great one. But all he needed was a scholarship, if he could get one, even one that was just going to reduce his tuition, he could manage. Once he was over there, he could always get a job that could help him pay his lodging and other stuff.

“Everything will be fine,” the man said and patted him on the shoulder almost lovingly, “I know how difficult things are for you right now, but everything is going to be fine and you won’t regret making the right decision to work with us.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Jude felt light as if a huge weight had suddenly been lifted from his shoulders as he walked out of the office. Out in the reception he could see about four people waiting, three young men and an older man who was surely a father to one or all of the other three young men.

Better early, he told himself as he walked out of the building.

Chapter Fifty

“How much do you have already?” Niba asked him two days later after he had explained his adventures of the past days to him. They were in a bar, on Niba’s insistence, “Come on, man, I need a beer.”

“When don’t you need a beer?” Jude had asked not feeling any great need to drink a beer. All he thought about was the possibilities that life was trying to offer him, and going around drinking beer was almost like down-playing those possibilities. But he accepted at the end of the day to accompany Niba after Niba insisted that he could not go and drink alone, “Beer taste different when you’re alone, man.”

“Shut up.”

“I’m telling you the truth.”

“How much do you have already?” Niba asked again.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean by you don’t know?” Niba asked, took a sip of his beer and said, “This is something serious.”

“Well, I think it’s about three hundred and fifty.” It was actually almost at least twenty five thousand less than that but he did not want to tell Niba that. It was the same pile of money they were living on anyway and Niba could not understand that or the fact that the money was always handy and actually easy to withdraw. Mabel was not some sophisticated bank that had a lot of formalities you had to undergo to withdraw some of your money, but even after that she was still the best person he knew who could keep the money, “I don’t know really, but I think it’s about that amount.”

Niba thought for a while, took a sip of his beer and asked, “Do you even know where this money is?”

“Mabel’s...”

“Keeping it,” Niba said, “And she’s not the type.”

“Look the problem here’s not Mabel or the money that I’ve in my hand.”

“I know.”

They sat for a while in silence, Niba taking a couple of sips of his beer. Jude looked outside at the fading day. It had been raining almost all day long,

but now the rain was gone and it had left a false sun that was now quietly sinking away. He wanted to feel assured that it was going to be easy to get all the money he needed, that it was going to be easy to conduct some junks and make them pay, but somehow he did not feel that way. He felt like it was going to be impossible, but he did not know why he felt that way. He still had time to hustle and he knew it was actually ample time, but he did not know why he could not feel that way.

“How much did you say you need totally again?” Niba asked.

“A million,” he replied still looking outside at the fading day.

“Just to arrange everything here. It does not include the fees and the rents and all that.”

“Yes, but if I get a scholarship...”

“And if you don’t?”

Jude looked at Niba and shrugged, he had stopped thinking about not getting one. He believed he was going to get one, and he depended on that. Well, he had decided to choose Belgium because of the promises of easy and good scholarships. He had the good results, a good GPA, and if that was a prerequisite for getting one (which he thought was the case), then he was going to get one. He shrugged again and said, “I think I’ve high chances of getting one. But if I don’t...” what’ll you do? Huh? What do you think you’re going to do if you don’t get one?

Buea...

That’s out of the question now, you’ve already engaged in something.

“I don’t know,” he said, “If I don’t get one, I’ll still try and go. If I’m there I can always manage and do something.”

Niba listened and said, “I still don’t know why you chose such a country. What do you want to send me when you’re there?”

“It’s cheap,” Jude said.

They were silent for a while, and the bartender came over to their table to take new commands, “I still have a beer,” Jude said. The man left and brought Niba a fresh bottle of beer, he took a long pull and made a sound as if it was the sweetest thing he had ever tasted, then sat back in his seat and said to Jude, “You’ve three hundred right now?”

“Three hundred and fifty,” Jude corrected him.

“Yes, something like that, which means you need seven hundred.”

Jude nodded.

Niba smiled, “Where are all the stupid junks when we need them?” he drank some beer and said, “We’re going to get them, don’t worry.”

“What about that stupid junk you were telling me about the other day?” Niba asked suddenly, the usual enthusiasm taking hold of him, “The one you told me about.”

“Forget it, she’s not going to pay.”

“Hey, man don’t...”

“She’s afraid and no longer interested.”

Niba smiled his diabolic smile, the one that was always there when he started getting a lot of crazy ideas in his head, and said to Jude, “She has to pay, man, we need her.”

The potential client Niba was talking about was a lady who had been showing some signs of interest in one of the puppies on Jude’s site. She had started communicating, really giving him hope and then suddenly she had started sounding so suspicious and asking him a lot of questions he could not answer. The suspicion had taken over her when it had been time for her to pay for her imaginary puppy, the particular one she had confessed to Jude time after time that she was having sleepless nights just thinking of when she would hold the puppy in her hands. It was always the ladies, Jude thought, always the ladies who fell so easily when it came to puppies and silly looking dogs. He did not know why the things were so important to them, and at times he did not really care. All he needed from them was that silly interest they had on his ghost puppies, enough interest to pay for them. That was all he had wanted from the lady in question, a lady he sometimes imagine how she was physically, always coming up with a picture of a fat white woman in her early fifties who still thought she was a child of five. All he needed from all the silly junks was money, but the woman was not going to pay.

“She’s not going to pay,” he said.

“She’s going to, when I get into her head,” Niba said already offering to communicate with her.

Jude shrugged.

“Come on, man, a stupid old woman’s not going to escape my trap,” he took a drink and said, “Don’t worry we’ll get every single junk that comes our way this time to pay no matter what.”

He could see Niba was already feeling the beer, but what he said felt a little reassuring to him. At times he wished he could have all the confidence that seeped out of Niba at certain times.

“How long did you say you have to get the money?” Niba asked.

“Less than a month.”

Niba nodded, “Then you have to learn to pray, my friend.”

When they were leaving the bar, Niba patted him on the back and said in a voice that echoed with the effects of the beer he had been drinking, “Don’t worry, man, we’ll get the money even if it means going down to hell and taking it from Lucifer’s hands, we’ll get it.”

Jude laughed though he did not think it sounded very funny.

“That’s a promise and I don’t fail when I promise anybody,” Niba said laughing along, then he looked at Jude seriously and said, “Just don’t forget me when you go over there though.”

“I won’t.”

“All I need’s a shiny Mercedes car.”

Jude laughed and told him to shut up.

Chapter Fifty-one

That night he found himself actually praying to God for luck in getting as many junks as possible. It was the first time he had ever asked God for any help with his scamming business consciously and he caught himself before he could go through with the prayers.

What are you doing?

He needed God, needed His help. If only He could lend him a hand, he knew everything was going to be alright. But was asking for God's help in something like scamming, which was a business clogged with lying and fraudulence a good idea? He did not think so. But he needed the money; he needed the money in less than a month's time and he was certain even God could understand that. What was so difficult to understand in his case? Was he not just trying to survive just like everybody else? And was what he was doing that bad?

No, he did not think so. There were worst ways to look for money and he had almost been initiated in one of those horrible ways.

But it was still hypocrisy to ask God to help him in such a business.

Such a business that involved only lying and lying and lying some more just to rid some poor fellow of his hard earned money - Money that the poor fellow had surely sweated hours upon hours to get.

Chicken change!

Was there any amount of money on earth that was chicken change? People sweated even to get the tiniest sums, and he was certain of that. It was not only in Africa and in Cameroon in particular where people worked hard and even more than hard to earn a living. Those poor junks were just normal people like him who had to look for a job and complain everyday and work hard before they could get a dime. And what was he doing to those poor people who were just like him? He was lying to them, duping them and taking their hard earned money in exchange for things that did not exist. And he was gutsy enough to ask God for help in doing that successfully.

But I need the money, I need the money very badly and there's no other way that I know of to get the money.

God had to understand, God had to understand that he himself felt bad about what he was doing, that at times his conscience worried him...

"At times I see their faces," he had told Niba once.

"Whose faces?"

"All the junks I've lied to."

"You don't lie to anybody, man, forget that stupidity," Niba had said.

"You don't understand..."

"Don't start that shit, man. It's just a little money we take from all those rich white people, and most of it is money they made from African sweat. They owe us big time," Niba had reminded him again.

"How do you even know it's only white people who are junks?"

"Because they're the only fools who like buying all the stupid things we sell to them."

It was all simple in Niba's head and at times he could see the logic in it too, but it was not always that he saw that logic. He could not stop himself from thinking at times about the wrong in what he was doing, the evil he was carrying out with some faceless people he only met online in the internet.

It's a lesser evil.

You think so?

It's not that bad.

But he was just a thief, just another version of a thief. It was only that he was doing the stealing in a modern way, getting into people's brains and stealing their will power to resist his lies. He was a thief and praying to God to make him more successful. He turned around in bed and stared at Mabel's back in the dark. She was sleeping peacefully as always her own worries locked somewhere she could no longer reach. He felt some anger rising as he watched her sleep, she did not understand what he was going through, even if he told her she would still not understand.

He turned around and faced the ceiling once more.

Where were all the junks when he needed them? He thought and stifled a yawned.

The junks were getting wiser and wiser every single passing day, getting more and more difficult to be manipulated. He was sure, given some time, they would all probably just learn how to avoid buying online. It was possible and he could see it happening one day. That day would be a very bad day for

people like Niba and all the other addicted scammers whose only idea on earth was how to manipulate a junk's brain. Well, he was also certain that it was not possible for every human being using the internet to suddenly become wise, but still the small number that was going to be left when that wisdom took hold of the junks was going to be a minute number that every starving scammer was going to fight over.

God don't let that happen this month, he thought and caught himself again.

It's okay.

"And if God helps me it would be my last time," he told the ceiling and fell asleep that night making that promise to God.

Two weeks later, he looked at his account and saw that it was not really bulging.

Chapter Fifty-two

The first person who opened his mouth and said the words was Niba. Not that Jude could not have said them himself or that he could not see the writing on the wall. He could've said it for he too could see the writing on the wall, but it was Niba who said the words quietly one day in the fourth week, "I think we've a little problem," he said.

Things had actually been going on almost smoothly before then. He had been going to the cyber café with Niba and actually having promising clients, coming home always with a light in his heart that said everything was going to work out just fine.

"Are you sure you'll get it?" Mabel would asked as he lay tired beside her unable to sleep and dreaming about what he was going to do the next day and the possibility that he could get what he needed after all.

"Yes, I think so," he would say.

"That would be wonderful," she would say and he would hear that thing in her voice, that thing which he could not put a finger on, but something he knew was there.

Then two weeks after walking out of James' office, James had called him back to the office and handed him his admission letter.

"We have your admission," he told him smiling from ear to ear as if it was his own admission letter.

"Thank you."

"But that's not all, there're a couple of scholarships we've put you up for, both those offered by the university itself and those offered by private institutions and individuals and I think I can personally say you've a high chance of getting at least one."

He had come back home that day feeling the euphoria start to set in. He had been reading things correctly he told himself, and from what James said, he knew he was at the gate and that soon, very soon he could walk through that gate.

"That's wonderful," Mabel had said to him looking at the important looking admission letter in his hand.

"It'd be truly wonderful if I get a good scholarship," he told her.

“Yes, that too.”

He had almost gotten hold of that thing he heard in her voice, almost placed his finger on it, but before he could do so it disappeared again.

Then a week later he had received another call from James, and he had heard the light in the voice as he had listened, his heart pounding in his chest and that sensation of defecating taking over his bowels.

“I’ve got some news that I think is actually good,” James had said to him and then laughed and said, “No it’s not just good news, it’s terrific news. You’ve got a scholarship and it’s truly a good one that covers tuition and lodging...”

“Thank...”

“Now, all you’ve to do is get the little fee you need to make everything easy for you.”

“Thank you very much, sir,” Jude said feeling some warm tears of euphoria come to his eyes, “I’m truly grateful, I’m happy.”

“No I’m happy,” James said to him, “I’m happy we could work with you so far, I just hope you’re going to keep me happy and make me happy with myself for believing in you from the very beginning.”

“I’ll not fail you,” Jude had promised.

“That’s serious,” Niba said when he told him the news, “I think we’ve to be serious too.”

Jude nodded finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.

It was when he checked his account that he started feeling the darkness that was approaching, the darkness that was blocking away the light, driving away the euphoria and replacing it with a lot of thinking and sleepless nights.

“We’ve a problem, I think we’ve a little problem,” Niba said looking at the computer screen before him. They were in the last week of the month and time was fast running out. No, time was not only running out, there was no time left even to do some magic.

“How much time do we’ve left?” Niba asked knowing the answer.

Jude said nothing. All the very promising clients they had had in the first week had just started getting wise, just started getting a lot suspicious and most of them had just disappeared.

“Huh?”

Jude shrugged.

“Three days,” Niba said and whistled, “Can the people give you some more time?”

It was not possible, James had explained to him that they wanted to collect the fee for every student who was working with them this time and start processing things all at the same time, “It’s a lot easier when we treat everything in a batch.”

Where’re the junks when I need them?

God sent them away, he thought looking at the screen before him. He did not know what to do, did not know if there was anything else he could do. He could feel the door closing before him, closing when his foot was already on the threshold of the door. It was a very sad feeling.

“Tell me again, how much do we’ve?” Niba asked and answered the question himself, “Six hundred and twenty-five and that means we need about four hundred to make it a million,” he looked at Jude, “And we’ve a week left,” he whistled and said, “We’ve a little problem, man, a little problem and I don’t see a solution.”

Jude nodded.

“I hate this life.”

Jude nodded again.

But that that same night Niba called him as he lay in bed pretending to himself that he was going to sleep. It was after midnight and he groped for the cell phone not feeling any enthusiasm. But Niba sounded excited as he talked to him, almost shouting as if he was deaf, “I’m a genius, I’m a genius,” Niba was shouting, “I told you I’m a genius, didn’t I tell you that? I’m bad, man.”

Jude was silent so he said in a quieter voice, “I found it.”

“Found what?” Jude wanted to ask him but Niba started telling him he was a genius again.

“I found it, man,” Niba laughed, “Jesus, my brain’s big. I’m impossible.”

“What...?” Jude tried.

“I found the solution, man.”

The solution to what? Jude thought still not getting what on earth Niba was trying to tell him.

“We had a little problem remember? A little problem that we could not solve?”

Jude's brain was waking.

"I just solved that little problem," Niba said.

Chapter Fifty-three

“Why didn’t I think about this early?” Niba asked no one in particular the next day still excited. Last night he had told Jude only that he had found the solution to Jude’s problem then had hung up, “Why didn’t I think about this early? Something so stupid and easy?”

Jude was confused and still feeling the effect of being made to wonder all night without rest what Niba had found as a solution. He was still tired and could feel his eyes betraying him, they felt like they had large pieces of sand moving just beneath their lids. But he did not know if he should be excited as Niba was or what.

“The credit union, man,” Niba said finally.

“What?”

“The credit union.”

“What’s that?”

Niba waved a hand in the air like a magician waving his wand, “The credit union, that’s our solution.”

Credits unions were small micro financial bodies that now seemed to occupy every tiny community in Cameroon. They were there to help the local communities to save their money and to borrow when there was need. But Jude had never had anything to do with a credit union or even thought a lot about them. He could remember that he had seen several of them just around town; they were dotted here and there in town.

But the credit union as a solution to his problem, he could not see how that was possible. Was Niba going insane or what?

“The credit union,” Jude said slowly and shook his head, “I don’t know.”

“Oh come on, the credit union can help us, man,” Niba said and grabbed his hand, “I use to listen to my old man talk about it, I’ve even gone to his own credit union to save some money for him, anyway, that was long ago. What I’m trying to say is that I know how they function and it’s simple, they can help you.”

Jude could still not see how, so he said, “I don’t understand.”

“Oh,” Niba said with some annoyance in his voice, he seemed not to understand why Jude could not see something so easy, “It’s simple, all you need’s to create an account with any credit union of your choice.” Niba explained his solution; all Jude needed to do was create an account and put the money he already had in the account and then ask for a loan.

“Is that possible?” Jude asked not believing what Niba was saying.

“That’s how they function, it’s as possible as anything and it doesn’t take time.”

“But creating an account...”

“It won’t take a day, just a few hours and then you can put the money you’ve inside and then ask them for a loan.”

“But they cannot just give me the loan like that, when I’m just a new person.”

“Why not? That’s how they function, they give loans to their members and when you create an account with them you’re already a member.”

Jude thought about the idea for a while, he could see the logic in it and if all what Niba was saying was true then that was the best thing he could do right now. The only problem was that it was a strange world, the world of credit unions and all the financial institutions. He had never had any dealing with that world and he did not know how he was going to proceed.

“It’s easy, all you’ve to do is go to one and tell them what you want.”

“Which one? You know there’re several in town and I’m not very used to all that and...”

“I’ll take you to the one my old man goes to, I think there’re still a few people there who can recognize me.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, man, what are friends for?” Niba slapped him on the back and asked, “Do you’ve the money here with you?”

“No.”

“Then go get it.”

Creating the account and putting money in it was an easy thing, far easier then he would have thought. Actually the gray haired man sitting behind a desk in an office with a sign that said “Manager” at the door was actually happy to see him and happy that he wanted to become a member of their

credit union. The man explained things to him and he saw that he had a lot of possibilities to even do more than just take a loan from the credit union.

I'm going to buy Niba a big beer, Jude thought listening to the gray haired man talk.

"You can even take a loan triple your savings," the man was saying to him, "But in that case you'll need a surety. But if you want a loan double your savings like you want it's easy, there'll be no complications and you don't need a surety."

Jude nodded, all he needed was a million, but Niba had convinced him that he should ask for a 1.2 million.

"You'll need money even if you pay the fee," Niba had explained to him.

"Good, you can come tomorrow and see the loan officer," the manager said and stood up and shook hands with him, "Welcome."

Chapter Fifty-four

It was easy, more than he would've thought it would be. He had thought about the idea of taking a loan and the procedure that it entailed as something that was going to take forever. But it was an easy task and it was evident even in the eyes of the young loan officer who looked like he was his age (though a lot swollen), as he shook his hand with a small smile that meant all business on his face.

"Please have a seat," the loan officer said offering him the client's chair.

In less time than Jude would have expected the man was before him with a form, and told him, "All you need to do is fill this form, the amount you want, how you're going to repay it and all other information about you and I think everything will be fine." When Jude started looking at the form the loan officer continued, "The amount you want is not a problem if it's double your savings but if it's more than that then you'll need some collateral or a surety." Jude told him about the amount he wanted and what amount was in his account, the loan officer smiled his business smile and said, "Then I think you won't need a surety or any collateral."

Then the man went on to tell him about the interest rates. It was eighteen francs per thousand after every month, the man said to him, and that every month that he did not pay it was bound to accumulate. Jude ran a calculation in his head and came up with something like twenty-one thousand per month for the 1.2million he had requested. It was not a small amount he thought, and if situations arrived when he could not pay in time then it was bound to accumulate and that would be a serious amount. But he did not think that was a problem, he was going to repay the loan before the end of six months, he was sure of that. All that he needed was to find himself out there in Europe where it was easy to get a job even while going to school, and he would work and pay the loan easily. "You won't pay any interest this month, that means the interest will start counting only after next month," the loan officer was telling him. That was another good news, Jude thought, it meant he could scrub out the interest by one month which meant if he was going to pay the loan in six month's time as he hoped, then he would only pay interest for five months. That did not sound bad at all to him. Another interesting

fact was that when he would've paid all the loan he would still have his account, and that was a big plus, for something like that could always come in handy.

"Good," the loan officer said when he finished with the form, "I'll take a look at it and then validate it and send it to the cashier, you can just wait outside."

The man shook hands again with him before he left the office.

It took just a couple of minutes and he found himself before the cashier who counted the clean banknotes and handed them to him, that usual business smile on her face as she handed him the money.

"Thank you," Jude said as he pocketed the money, it weighed like a ton.

And his heart started to beat...

Niba was waiting for him outside and he smiled at him, actually feeling very happy. He told himself that it was official now, that he was definitely going to Belgium to pursue his education and a future, a future that was going to be bright.

"How did it go?" Niba asked as he reached him.

"Good, very good," Jude said his hand unconsciously reaching for the bulge in his pocket. He suddenly felt very naked as he stood there with Niba by the roadside waiting for a taxi. It was like every living soul walking pass could see that bulge in his pocket and know exactly what was there. It was like every living soul was staring at him as he stood there by the roadside.

"Where to?" Niba asked.

"Cow Street," Jude said.

He was going directly to pay the money to the organization, there was no way he could take the money back home.

Chapter Fifty-five

Jude ran a hand over his jacket pocket again where the money was located, he still felt naked even as he sat in the sofa inside the reception area of the building. He stole a glance at the young woman busily punching away on her computer keyboard and sent his hand into the pocket to feel the money again.

It is still there, he told himself and almost smiled. He felt all childish and nervous as if everybody could see he had a bundle of banknotes in his pocket, as if anybody who could see it was going to jump on him and take the money away.

“Nice place,” Niba said.

“Yes,” Jude nodded but if he was asked to repeat what Niba had just said sitting beside him, he would not have. Now, he felt like taking out the money from his pocket and counting it. There was that constant voice in his head, a tiny voice that was telling him that maybe all the money was not there, that maybe a few banknotes were missing. But he had counted the money in the credit union, counted the money and made sure every banknote was accounted for.

Count it again, you never know.

Stop it!

What's wrong in counting the money again just to make sure everything's okay?

Shut up!

He was going to go crazy just sitting here and thinking about the money in his pocket. He needed to part with the money, needed to take the load off his shoulders. But the young woman could not understand something that simple, “Please, you’ll have to wait for just a few minutes, James is with someone in his office,” she had smiled her polite smile and then asked, “Mind if I give you coffee?”

“Don’t bother...”

“I’ll like a cup,” Niba had said quickly and now he was sitting beside him sipping the coffee as if it was a drug that could cure mortality and looking around the room and particularly at the young woman pounding away on her computer keyboard. Niba did not know what he was going through right

now sitting with the money inside his pocket and feeling that itch to take it out and start counting it again. But Niba could not know that, he told himself, he was not the one carrying the money in his pocket.

Paranoia, padre, that's your problem.

It was the very paranoia that had taken hold of him that afternoon as they had sat inside the taxi, Niba chatting away about things he had not been able to hear and so could not even remember. He had felt transparent inside the taxi, as if every passenger getting into the taxi could see exactly what was in his pocket. At one point he had found himself making up visions, images that felt so real to him as he sat there, the visions of some passenger whom he could not see clearly suddenly gripping him and placing a knife on his neck and whispering into his ear, "Give me everything you have."

"I don't have anything."

"Do I look stupid to you?" a strong hand gripping his throat and the blade of that knife cutting a little into the skin of his neck and bringing out a bit of blood, "Hand me the money, pal, I know you have it in your pocket."

"Please..."

"I'm not joking with you, pal," the knife now digging deeper and deeper, "You can do this the easy way or the hard way."

Jude found himself sweating again just as he had been sweating in the taxi.

Jude looked at the clock on the wall again. It was too slow and the person with James in the office was taking all the time in the world.

He leaned back in the sofa and tried to relax himself, but another thought leapt into his head again, this time it was just a question; how are you sure they can be trusted? Mabel had asked him the same question almost out of nowhere last night as he told her about his credit union adventure.

"You're going to take a loan?" she had wondered, a worried look suddenly taking over her face.

"It's the only way I can get the money."

"But..."

"If I don't get the money now I'll miss my only chance in life," he had told her feeling a little anger rising. He could not see why she wasn't seeing things straight.

“It’s not your only chance,” she said that thing in her voice coming out again, that thing he could not place a finger on, “How do you even know they will do what they’re saying once you give them the money?”

Jude had stood for a while in silence thinking about that question. It was funny that she could still ask him something like that after all he had told her about the organization, after all that he knew and all that they had done for him and were promising to do. What was there to doubt? He asked himself, what was there that was not in the clear? Nobody had pressured him, the only thing he could think of was how genuine James was, how genuine and supportive James was. James wanted him personally to succeed and he could feel that deep inside him. There was no way a man like James would be a fake, James was authentic, a man who knew what he was talking about. He looked up at her and said quietly, “They’ll do everything they’re telling me.”

She had stayed quiet. But that night lying beside him, she had said in a voice that was suddenly so filled with that something that he almost sat up, “I’m sorry.”

He turned and looked at her, she was looking at him and he could see something in her eyes, something that even in the near darkness of the room he could make out. It was the glitter of tears that were coming.

“I’m sorry I said all what I said,” she said again.

“You didn’t say anything wrong.”

She looked at him in silence for a while and said, “You’re going to go abroad, for years.”

He suddenly placed a finger on that something that had been in her voice all these days.

“You’re going to be there for years and you’ll forget...”

“Please,” he took her hand.

“You’re going to forget about me.” The tears were now hanging on her lower eyelids ready to start spilling.

“Look...” Jude found he could not say anything.

“It’s not a problem,” she said, “It’s not that I don’t want you to go, and I’m happy you’ll go...”

Jude shook his head; he had not thought of something like that, he had been too busy these past days trying to get things on the right path that he had not even allowed such a thought to linger into his head. Now, he did not

know what to say to her or how to even say anything to her. But what he knew was that he had never thought of one day forgetting her. How could she think of something like that? How could she think about something like that after all they had shared together?

“How...?” he tried to say.

“I’ll understand,” she smiled a sad smile and he could see the tears start to flow from her eyes and down her cheeks. It was a pair of distorted rivers and they joined before they reached her nose and flowed down to the pillow she had her head on, “I just want you to know that I’ll understand that,” she said.

“I can’t...” Jude tried again and shook his head, “I can never do something like that to you,” he said, “I promise you I’ll never do something like that.”

He embraced her bare body and felt the cold tears on his shoulders as he whispered time after time into her ears, “I can never do something like that to you.

He believed that, just as he believed the fact that he was giving his money to a group of authentic people who were going to assure his future. Not only his future but that of Mabel also, he thought.

“She says you can go in,” Niba said nudging him. Jude had not heard her talk as he sat his mind wandering.

For no reason he knew of, he found himself thinking about Derrick as he walked into James’ office. When was he going to inform Derrick about this? Was there even any need for him to do that? He wanted to believe there was no need informing Derrick when everything was okay; part of him wanted him to believe that Derrick was not really going to care. But there was another part of his mind, that part of his mind that had observed Derrick the last time they had been together, that part of his mind thought differently. That part of his mind told him that Derrick was just another weak human being like him and everybody else, a human being who needed all the things normal human beings needed. And Derrick was his brother after all. He was going to do everything possible to help Derrick out when he was over there, he promised himself. He was going to do everything to make Derrick at least proud of him once he was over there. He was going to make things right.

James was almost at the door to meet him as he walked into the office, his hand outstretched, “I’m happy you could make it, I’m truly happy you could make it.”

Chapter Fifty-six

I'm going to solve a problem, he kept telling himself. It was a song in his mind. And his mind needed that song. It was only when he had solved the problem that he was going to get out of the dark cloud which he was wrapped up in.

Whatever is necessary!

Yes, even if it meant doing something he had never thought he would do, even if it meant making a sacrifice he had always seen as too big. Now it was just a sacrifice, a simple sacrifice which he could endure and then forget. Even God could understand.

God!

He looked up at the dark heavens again, the cloud still a thick blanket, the rain still seeping down ceaselessly and landing on his face. What did God have to do with this? Even if there was something there, an iota of something there that had anything to do with Him, was it not clear that He could not even see, that he was already blind? Yes, he was certain He was already blind, blind to whatever was happening, blind to whatever had happened and what was going to happen. It did not concern Him. Or even to Him it was another point of amusement, another way to get amused sitting there up in his heavens or wherever it was He called home.

Jude felt another wave of nausea hit his stomach, and started spreading up towards his mouth. He did not want this any longer, he did not want to puke anymore for his ribs were already hurting. But he knew it was going to come anyway...

Maybe it's a way to stop you, maybe your stomach's just trying to tell you something, to make you stop before it's too late.

He got down on one knee again, dipping his knee on a small pool of water and started retching. His stomach was already empty but that need to go on vomiting was still there, that horrible need that he hated but knew he could nothing about.

It's trying to stop you before it's too late.

But if that was its reason then it was too late, he had already made his decision and nothing was going to stop him. He was going to solve all his

problems tonight, every problem and be like the others. What was wrong with that anyway? What was wrong with trying to be like the others? With trying to get his own share from life? Wasn't that what the world wanted? Wasn't that what God wanted from him?

He stopped retching, the taste of the cheap whisky in his mouth. It was the taste of that horrible whisky that was bringing back the nausea.

Are you sure?

He wanted to believe that but he knew deep down it was still just a lie.

Slowly he stood up and continued his jeremiad, every step taking him closer and closer to a new beginning...

Chapter Fifty-seven

Of all the thoughts that ran through his head, the one that said he might have been duped did not surface after he had handed the money to James. It didn't even register in his head after the first week had passed nor did it even register after the second week was halfway through. Things had been fine actually, and he had gone on in his state of euphoria like a drug addict high on some very volatile substance. There was no reason not to be high, he had done the right thing, had made the right decisions and had dealt with the right people, people who were as authentic as they came...

Or looked to be so.

All he could see in his state of high was the reassuring smiles, the reassuring handshakes and the reassuring pats on his back. It had been a well made fabric with no tears and holes (but there had been holes, a lot of them that he had not been able to see).

"I'm proud of you, Mr. Maimo," James had said to him that day when he had gone to pay the fee that was supposed to solve everything, "I'm truly proud of you."

And he was proud of himself too...

"We'll start the procedures right away," the man said, "I remember you told me you don't even have a passport yet."

Jude nodded.

"At some point we'll call you to come and go with an agent to get one."

It was all sealed and there had been nothing left for him to do than to embrace that high, that lulling high that came with the daydreaming. He was already there, in that fantasy world of his dreams and it was a world which contained everything he had always believed in.

"How long is it going to take?" he had asked his heart still beating, that feeling of disbelief still hovering over him, "How long is it going to take to process everything? I just want to..."

"I understand," James laughed, "Everybody in your shoes will be excited about this and would want to know," he looked at the computer on his desk and said looking back up at Jude, "Two weeks maximum. Yes, I think in two

weeks time or a few days after that depending on how fast things work out you'll be able to leave this country and study overseas, my friend." The man had smiled a charming smile and let him out of the office.

"In two weeks time," Niba had said after listening to him and had whistled in admiration, "Man, you're already a bushfaller."

"Not yet."

"What can go wrong again? You've paid them and they're already..."

"It's still a process, the passport, the visa and all the other things."

"But nothing can go wrong with all that, you told me so yourself."

Jude shrugged, "You never know with these things." But he had believed like Niba. He knew all that was stopping him from being officially a student in Belgium was a week or two. And what was a week? It was nothing, no time at all, he told himself, just like there was nothing that could stop what was in play from playing out in his favor...

Or so he had thought.

"Remember, all I need's a Mercedes car, a shiny one," Niba said.

Jude laughed, "A black shiny one."

"Double head lamps."

"That's a small thing."

And all that stood between that was a week or two...

"You've their number?" Mabel had asked him just three days after he had left James' office. She was already looking a little worried as if it had been anything but just a few days.

"Yes, I've their number and their address," he told her, "But why will I be calling them now?"

"I don't know, just to ask how they're progressing."

"It's too early to start worrying them," he said, "And there's no need to even worry, everything will be alright."

But two days after that, he had found himself itching to call, itching just to hear from James. It was a stupid thing, he told himself, a stupid and childish thing to feel that way, but it was there.

"You can just call them anyway, to let them know you're serious..." Mabel had told him.

"That'll only tell them I'm childish."

“You’re not childish and calling them to find out for yourself will only show how serious you are. It’s your money you gave them...”

“I know, but...” he thought for a while and shook his head, “They know how serious I am, and it’s only just been five days.”

And what was the need when he already knew what James will tell him.

“It’s always nice to know our students are serious,” the voice sounding so understanding but a little annoyed at the childish behavior, “It tells me a lot about what I should expect from them, that they’ll also be serious when they finally go overseas.”

And what would he say to that, “I’ll try my best, sir,” naturally.

“I already know your best and I can assure you it’s excellent.”

Jude smiled to himself, the man was not going to call him a childish impatient fool if he called, but the man was going to talk in an understanding manner and try to make him feel reassured. And after all the praises the man was going to tell him, “Don’t worry, I’ll call you in a few days time to inform you of any progress.”

“Thank you, sir,” he would naturally say.

That week ended and the next started and the call did not come. His heart started beating faster at every time he caught himself thinking about it, which was almost every waking hour. But he told himself it was going to come the next week, that he was only embracing the paranoia again.

But when the middle of the week came, he found himself scared even about the idea of picking his phone and making a call to James just to ask how things were progressing. It was a new feeling and somehow it was gaining grounds in his heart, a feeling that something was wrong somewhere, that something was wrong and he did not really want to know about it.

What could that be?

I don’t know.

You think so, padre?

Yes, I don’t know.

I think you do, padre.

Shut up!

But that weird voice could not go away, just as the feeling that had brought the voice. It kept growing as the days slowly crept by.

And that second week ended without the awaited call coming, and the third week started.

And suddenly he started seeing the gray...

Chapter Fifty-eight

As usual, the first person who opened his mouth and hinted him on what the gray was really all about was Niba. He would've wanted to say that it had been hidden, that deep in his heart he had not been feeling it too, but that would've been a lie. For somewhere in his working mind he saw what that gray was, but the problem was that he did not want to believe what he was seeing. It was easier to build a shield, a good solid one painted and all that, all round his mind, a shield he had known all along to be false, but a shield he needed to keep...

There was still hope that shield said to him time and time again, even after listening to that irritating computer generated voice telling him that the number he was trying to call was unavailable at the moment.

There was still hope...and it was only a moment...

And there was no magic involved when you called a number and that voice told you that it was not available at the moment. It was a common phenomenon, a phenomenon that was common everywhere in the world and particularly in Cameroon. And usually there was no need to panic for all that voice wanted from you was to be patient for just a moment, to be patient until the number was available again. But...

It started sounding more and more like magic when he called the next day and the next and heard that particular irritating voice that had no emotions attached to it, tell him the same thing. It started sounding like magic because very fast, his mind started seeing the gray more and more, and his heart started beating like a race car, and the trembling started and that frown started to be more permanent as a certain knowledge started to seep through that well constructed shield. But still...

"Network," he had thought aloud running his tongue over his now constantly dry lips, "Network, it's just network. You know how network can be at times."

"Why don't you go to their office?" Mabel had come up with a more practical solution.

"Huh?"

"You can go to their office and check..."

And he had seen it in her eyes, that knowledge, that knowledge which he did not want to believe was already in his head too. That unspoken knowledge that was visible on her face even if she too tried to pretend it was not there yet.

“Why?” he asked quietly wetting his lips again.

“You can go there and talk to them,” she said, “I think that’s the right thing to do.”

I don’t need a phone to do that, and I don’t need any network.

He nodded.

And that was logical.

But he suddenly knew without any doubt that as logical as that sounded, he did not want to go there for it was a bad idea, a very terrible idea. And he was suddenly afraid of that idea that sounded so logical.

“Why don’t you want to go there?”

“I’ll wait a few more days and see,” he said, “They’ll call.”

He wanted to believe that, wanted to believe that it was not very necessary trying to work himself up about going to the office.

But why?

I don’t know.

What are you afraid of?

Nothing!

Then go check the place out.

He shook his head quietly. There was nothing to be afraid of and he knew it, no beast waiting for him, just...

Just what?

He really did not want to know.

And waiting did not sound like such a bad idea. Waiting was the mature thing to do, because going there was only going to prove how stupid he had been panicking like a baby. Just imagine what it would be like, he thought, going there and meeting someone like James who had been waiting for him already, “Mr. Maimo I’ve been trying so hard to call you, but you know about the network these days don’t you?”

That would make him feel stupid and silly about himself, about his panicky heart - A child who could not hold his impatience heart for a while and just wait.

“No, I’ll wait,” he told himself staring up at the ceiling night after night.

And one night he thought about the internet blog, he had the address and all he needed was to go check the site and see how their activities were going on.

Why don’t you just go to the building? What’ll the blog tell you?

“They’ve a blog,” he told Niba the next day his voice too controlled that it sounded even strange to his own ears.

“You tried calling them again?”

Jude nodded, “Network.”

Niba nodded, but Jude could see that look in his eyes too, that look that said more than he was saying. The look was becoming a constant even in Mabel’s eyes these days.

“I’ll check their blog.”

Niba nodded, “That’s not a bad idea.”

And a few minutes later they were sitting in a cyber café, Jude typing the address of the site, his lips going dryer as he typed. The computer seemed to take forever to process the information and when it did, Jude sat there looking at the screen and not knowing what to say.

What’s this?

The only answer that came was from the silent computer screen and it was a one sentenced message, written in red ink, and it said simply; site currently under reconstruction.

What’s this?

Somehow he had the feeling he was in a dream, that he was sleeping. He wanted to pinch himself to make sure it was not all a dream, that he was sitting before the computer and looking at that message. Actually, he had been in a dream all this time, a dream that had started like a fairy tale in some enchanted land, but a dream that was now turning into a nightmare. A nightmare he knew like every other nightmare on this earth he wasn’t going to like one bit.

He wanted to lift his hand, to retype the information and give the command again, but suddenly he felt powerless, felt like he could not even move a muscle.

What’s this?

It’s under repairs, that’s what it says.

But what did that mean to him?

It means nothing big, he wanted to tell himself, it means nothing, just something temporal, this will be arranged.

Or will it?

It's a common thing online, it's not the first time I've seen this message.

He wanted to believe that, but the gray was there in force, the gray was with him now and was not going to let him go anytime soon. Actually he could see that the gray was rapidly turning into dark; a dark cloud that was going to embrace him and not let go.

He opened his mouth to say something but nothing came out, just the sound of his completely dry and saliva free mouth opening like a door that was completely void of lubrication around its hinges. A door that could only open to reveal junk that the eyes could not begin to comprehend.

"What's this?" Niba asked the question for him, finally being able to find his own voice.

"I can't believe this," Niba murmured quietly to himself still looking at that message on the screen before them. Slowly, he took the mouse from Jude, "Let me see." He clicked on the screen several times and nothing happened, "What's this stupid thing?" Niba asked again and then looked at Jude, "Are you sure you typed the correct address?"

Jude nodded.

"This is not good," Niba whispered, "This is not good."

They were silent for a long while just sitting there and looking at the screen, the quiet room waiting for someone with the heart to say what was roaming in the mind already, to say what that gray was made of. After a while, Niba said without looking at him, "Man, you've been duped."

Chapter Fifty-nine

He slowly got up to his feet, but another wave of nausea sent him back on his knee. He opened his mouth this time waiting for the retching to start but nothing came, just that foul smell of whisky spilling out in thick vapors from his parted lips.

When is this going to stop?

He slowly got to his feet again supporting himself on his knees. His head was like a cramped room, hurting mercilessly and feeling like it was double its original size. He shut his eyes and waited for another wave of nausea to come, but this time it did not come. Closing his eyes felt good, it felt like he was going to sleep, like he was in his own dark world where nothing matter.

But he knew that was a lie, a lie that only wanted to prevent him from facing his ordeal. Nothing could go away until he made it to, that was the rule in this world. So, slipping into that darkness was not an option here. He slowly opened his eyes and straightened his back feeling his shirt stuck to his back. It was soaked completely and felt suddenly wet as it touched his back. The rain was still seeping down from that dark blanket of a cloud overhead and it was not going to stop anytime soon. But the rain was not going to stop him; he had to make that call. He had to...

He felt another wave of nausea, but this one disappeared somewhere in his stomach. He stopped walking and waited for the big one to come, but it did not come. God was finally on his side, he thought, God wanted him to be on his way without that nausea and vomiting that was already hurting his ribs.

But how could God want such a thing for him?

It was darkness, a bottomless pit which had an evil smell around it. So, how could God want him to succeed in such a thing? Something that was all against what His word said? Something that had no comprehension whatsoever? A carnal act that was out of this world?

Because it's His wish!

It had been His wish all along, His wish and nobody else's. He had planned it all along and He wanted to see him complete his journey down that path He had created for him. It was Him all along, Him who had made it

possible for him to come to live in this country, Him who had made it possible for him to have a father who was almost just a replica of nothing, his father who was just like God himself, blind to every human wish apart from his self amusement. It was God who had brought him in this world in a poor family, God who had brought Eric, God who had led him to James and his sweet promises. It was all His wish, and all he was doing was trying to make that wish possible.

Jude smiled, and then the smile turned into a laugh, a hearty laugh that had his chest hurting. The laughter felt good to him, so he grabbed his hurting chest and laughed some more looking up at the sky.

All he needed was to make one phone call, just one and His wish will be fulfilled.

“I love you,” he whispered to the dark heavens, the drizzling rain landing on his face as he stared up there at the invisible mighty being that controlled his poor miserable life.

Chapter Sixty

You've been duped!

That statement ran through his brain as he had sat in the cyber café that afternoon staring at the unblinking message on the screen before him. It was a strange statement, a statement whose meaning he did not think he knew or wanted to know. But he could feel that statement deep right inside, and it felt like the sting of hot vapor on the face when a pot of boiling water was suddenly opened close to the face. That hot sting of vapor that always made you to take a step back and examine what was in the pot from a distance. But he was not ready to take a step back, he was not ready to examine what was in that pot before him, he wanted that thing to be a mystery, a mystery that could completely be lost to him forever.

But that mystery was not willing to be lost from him, it was there before him, the real color that was behind that gray.

You've been duped!

Was that possible? Was it possible that an organization that sounded so authentic could be a fraud? He could not still let down that shield in his mind and start believing.

"I'll try their branch office in Yaounde," he said to Niba suddenly remembering that in the brochure he had at home there was a number of that branch office and even the number of their main office in Britain.

Niba shrugged and Jude could see what was written in that shrug, a simple yet cruel question; why waste your time?

But was he wasting his time?

Why don't you go and...

And do what?

I don't know.

Jude suddenly wanted to scream for that voice inside his head to shut up. He suddenly wanted to scream at Niba and at the computer screen that what they were insinuating was all lies, that the organization was an authentic organization whose only purpose was to help young people like him travel overseas and study, that they were all imagining things that were not there.

We're not a profit making organization...

Yes, he wanted to tell Niba that, to make him see what the organization was all about. But the only problem was that the part of him that could do that was now suddenly so weak and growing weaker, growing weaker and weaker as he stared at the computer screen with its unblinking message.

I can call their main office.

Yes, and then what? Are you even sure that it exist?

You've been duped, man.

He felt the anger suddenly start to rise as he started to see the edges of the picture before him, the picture that had been there all along, but the picture he had not been able to see.

He had trusted them, trusted the man who had been behind his desk smelling only of authenticity. He had actually felt something special for that man, that man who was just the embodiment of all that was a fraud.

"Why didn't I see this?" Niba whispered to himself, "Why didn't I sense something was wrong?"

Yes, why had he himself not sense something? Why hadn't he seen through the smiles and beaming faces? Seen what machinery had been working smoothly behind those faces?

Because you were a junk!

He had been blinded, blinded by his trust in something he had not investigated completely, blinded by his own longing. And now this...

But what was this?

Jesus, the loan!

He felt a lot of emotions take hold of him, emotions which he could not start to explain.

"How did we allow this to happen?" Niba was saying.

All the emotions inside him told him was that he was about to explode, that he could no longer hold it inside...

But he did not explode then.

Somehow, in that tiny part of his brain that never gave up even when he was already down and going deeper down, there was still some hope. That hope that this could all be overreacting, that this could all be some creation of his mind, that things could still come out fine. And he wanted to hold firmly to that tiny part of his mind as he flagged a taxi, Niba tagging along, and headed for that place in Cow Street which was going to clarify

everything. Which was going to tell him how wrong he had been, how wrong Niba had been to tell him what that gray was all about.

And when they got out of the taxi before that once vibrant building, he started wishing he had not come. His heart was beating loud enough to drown even the sound of Niba beside him telling him, “This is not good,” or the sound of the taxis as they rolled pass. His vision was suddenly blurred as he stood there looking at that building, repeating a prayer in his head that this should only just be a dream, that this was not all happening.

“This is not good,” Niba murmured again beside him he too seeing what Jude was seeing but refusing to see.

The building was still there, the gate was still there, but a lot was missing. There was no uniform security man at the gate. There were no foreign flags waving in the breeze as they pushed opened the gate and walked slowly into the compound. There were no cars parked outside, and there was no sign of a human soul outside or inside the building. In fact the building looked as if a human being had never stepped their feet inside, worse still used the building as an office for an organization which was specialized in helping young people study easily overseas.

What was the dream here? Jude asked himself, had he ever been here before? Had he ever been here and spoken to a man called James? A man who had a PhD from Leeds University in Britain? A man who had really like him? Had it all been his imagination?

It was just like a kid staring at his shattered balloon and still believing it was suddenly going to become whole again and inflated. He had taken the loan from the credit union; that was not a dream or some imagination. He had taken a loan and he was soon going to start paying for the loan. And not only that, there was the other thing, the other thing about Mabel that he could not start thinking of here...

You’ve been duped, man.

“Where did they all go to?” Niba wondered foolishly.

You’ve been duped and there’s nothing you can do about it.

No!

You’ve been duped like a fool.

No!

You’re the biggest fool in this world.

No!

He looked up at the building and suddenly it all came to him, all the picture in full multicolor. He exploded finally and then his heart started beating faster than normal...

Chapter Sixty-one

He slipped and fell, striking his knee on the ground as he fell. He felt a hot intense pain shoot through his whole body, a pain that temporally cleared his brain. The rain was still falling lightly but soaking him and everything under the dark heavens. Jude felt his knee sitting on the ground, he could feel where he had hit it on the ground and he knew without looking at it that there was a cut there. It was another of God's games, he told himself rubbing the knee and waiting for the pain to slowly dissolve, it was one of God's games that He played with silly toys like him. But he did not care because he knew all that, because he knew it was just delay tactics to delay him from reaching his goal.

"I hate you," he murmured and then laughed, "No, no I don't hate you, I love you."

What was the need getting angry at someone like Him? Someone he could never touch or even see? Anyway, when has doing His will ever been easy?

"I'm going to do it," he whispered and stood slowly still feeling the pain as he started walking again. There was a new wetness on his knee where he had struck on the ground and he knew it was not water, that it had a red color. But that was not a problem, he was close to where he could make a call and he could see the shops before him, but they were all almost closed, but he could see one that was still open. All he hoped for was that the man had a phone that he could use.

"I'm about to close," the man inside the shop said to him and he could see the man was not happy about him appearing at that time of the night. The man was already parking his things up to close his shop like his neighbors.

"I just need to make a call," Jude said.

"The phone's not near and I'm already closing."

"Please, I need to make a call."

The man looked at him and asked, showing some concern for the first time, "What's the problem? Who's dying?"

“There’s no problem,” Jude replied feeling that bubble of anger start to rise, “All I want to do is make a call.”

“You look...”

Jude looked at the man with a look that could have killed if looks could kill, he saw the man almost take a step back.

“Please give me your phone.”

The man disappeared inside the shop and Jude felt his own cell phone, it was still in his pocket and it was going to remain there. It was off because he did not want to answer any call anymore...

“Where are you, man?” Niba had called him early that night as he had sat by the roadside drinking the whisky and contemplating his decision, “Where are you? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he had said.

“Mabel just called me,” Niba said, “She sounded worried and she doesn’t know where you are. Did you people have any problem? Huh? Are you sure everything’s alright?”

“Everything’s fine.”

“Then where are you? You know I can come and meet you if you want, just tell me where you are...”

He had stopped the call there and had switched off his cell phone and pocketed it.

He knew Mabel was dead worried and she had called him before even calling Niba, but what she could not understand was that he was doing this too because of her. Yes, because of her and the other thing...

I’m doing this for her too.

“Here,” the shop keeper was back with the cell phone and had it extended towards Jude, “One minute is one fifty.”

Jude took the phone and said nothing, and then dialed the number that was still strangely in his head; the number he had always tried to forget, the number he had vowed he would never ever call...

I’m doing this for her too.

Chapter Sixty-two

Yes, he was doing this for her too.

And he was doing this for her for a little reason. He was doing this for her because it had happened again, because even after all that had been happening in his life, it had happened again.

"It even delayed, man," Niba's eyes told him after he had made a big scene of being surprised and understanding with him, "You too slept together and it was just normal that something like that could've happened again," Niba's eyes continued to tell him, "What did you expect?"

I don't know.

"It's only natural."

But was it natural? He did not know. But what he knew was that it was one of those things that make you wonder about life and what it had in store for you. It made him see that nothing was natural about the things that happened in the world and particularly to him. That everything was a wicked plan executed perfectly by the hand of the almighty.

But what Niba said with his mouth was, "When did she tell you this?"

"Two weeks ago," Jude said.

"Before..."

Jude nodded; she had told him before he had discovered that his dreams had been simply castles in the air. She had told him and he had actually felt nothing bad about it happening again, it was just well because he had a future which was all bright, and taking care of a child was not going to be a problem once he was out there. They had actually talked about it, dreamed about it.

"I wish it's a boy," he had said to her

She had smiled at him, that smile of a woman who was happy about what was growing in her, the smile of a woman who had no fear whatsoever, who could see the future, "Don't start," she had warned him.

"I like to have a boy that's all."

But a week later he did no longer know what he wanted; his world had suddenly taken a long dip down the drain. And he had started feeling that anger and blaming her for letting it happen again. But now he knew who was

responsible, and it was not her or him, it was God. It was God who had drawn the perfect plan, the plan that was being executed in all perfection...

"What are you going to do?" Niba had asked him his face a mask of concern that Jude could now see through. That mask that was nothing but a lie, just like everything else. Niba did not care and had never cared, Jude decided, it was just a game to him just like life itself was just God's game where He decided who the player was going to be as He pleased.

"What are you going to do about it?" Niba asked him again.

Jude shrugged and said, "I don't know yet." He felt like laughing, it was all funny the way the game was being played. What if he just told Niba he was part of the game too, that even as he thought everything in life was a game, he too was just part of a larger game that he could not understand?

Niba looked at him and shook his head, that concern still in his eyes and that question that said, "Why don't you just do it as before?" written in them. But Niba was just a liar, a liar who was trying to impress him just like everybody had tried before and was still trying. But did Niba even know what role he was playing? Jude wondered and smiled coming to a conclusion that Niba himself did not know what he was doing. Niba was not even the one talking to him, just like Mabel had not been the one who had let it to happen again. Niba was just a puppet like everybody else, a puppet that was being controlled by a puppeteer who had a plan that was going to be executed at all cost.

"You know we can go and see my friend," Niba said, "It looks like that's the easiest option here, man and I think she knows it too."

Jude smiled and shook his head.

"That's the truth, man."

"The abortion?"

"Yes," Niba nodded a little too enthusiastically just like a puppet, "It's cost effective and it's the only way out."

It is cost effective...

And it was not only cost effective but it was the only way out for him. The only way to be free and what that way entailed was chopping up a poor innocent fetus that was fast becoming a child again, chopping it into bloody pieces then wrapping it up in a polythene bag and dropping it into the toilet. That was amusing...

“Look, I know how it feels, man,” Niba continued his prepared case, a case he himself did not even know was already prepared for him, “I truly do, but what’s there to be done?”

Jude shrugged.

“You’ve to think with your head here.”

“I’m thinking with my head.” And my head is better than yours, and what my better head is telling me you can’t believe. He looked at Niba and wanted to smile, he knew he was not only talking to Niba, but that he was talking to something else, that something that already had a plan for him, “I don’t think I can do it again.”

“Come on, man, things happen in life. A lot of things happen. Do you think about your future?”

Jude nodded, he thought about his future and he knew what color his future was painted in, but Niba could not see that.

“The fact that those bastards duped you is not the end,” the presentation of the case continued, “You can’t just destroy your life because of that.”

“I’m not destroying my life.”

“Then...”

“I can’t,” he shook his head and felt that urge to smile again when he saw the look on Niba’s face, that look that said he could see that his case was a lost one.

“You want to keep it?”

Jude shrugged.

“If the problem’s money, I can...”

“There’s no problem.”

And there was actually no problem because he was in control, because he knew just what he needed to do to make everything right. That one sacrifice that he was going to make and then forget all about it...

Chapter Sixty-three

“Hello?” the voice said in his ears, a voice he recognized immediately, and suddenly he found himself trembling, his heart beating a little faster. He had forgotten how it would be and that idea that maybe he was just wasting his time, that the man at the other end was not even going to talk to him once he knew who was calling.

Why should he after...?

“Hello?”

Jude felt beads of sweat start to form on his face even as the night was cold and he was all soaked from the constantly drizzling rain. What was he going to say? How was he going to tell the man at the other end that it was him calling? What was the man going to say when he heard his voice? Jude took a deep breath and felt the hand holding the phone shaking. How was he going to talk to the man when he had spat on his gift at first? How was he going to tell the man that all he wanted now was a second chance, for the hand of the clock to turn back?

“Hello?” the voice said again, “Who is this?”

Jude could sense some annoyance or thought so.

What am I going to do?

Jude parted his lips to say something but nothing came out, just a noisy breath that sounded like a sigh.

The man was going to stop the call; the man was simply going to drop the call. He could see that in his mind's eye, the man dropping the call and cursing the unknown caller. And what he knew was that if the man did something like that, he was not going to have the strength to call again.

Jude tried to open his mouth again, and it was suddenly dry, very dry.

I'm simply going to drop the call myself, he thought suddenly, the idea sounding very interesting to him, I'm simply going to stop the call and go back and see Mabel.

Why are you here?

I'll go back and sleep and tomorrow everything will be fine. New things can happen in my life, things that might be better than...

“Hello?” the voice said again, “Who is this?”

What are you doing? What do you think you're doing?

Jude ran a dry tongue over his equally dry lips and closed his eyes.

"Who is...?"

He said in a tiny voice that was almost inaudible, "Eric."

"Yes? Who is this?"

"It's me."

"Oh."

A crazy thought came to his head, a thought that was so crazy he did not want to think about it; it was as if Eric had been expecting him to call.

"Oh," Eric said, "Okay."

"It's me, Jude."

"Yes, are you okay?"

"Yes, I think so," Jude said.

Then why did you call? He expected Eric to say that in a sarcastic way, but Eric said nothing and they were silent for a while, each man waiting for the other to say something.

You can still stop the call, padre.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Eric asked finally.

What are you doing?

You can still drop the call and walk away from all this insanity. You can still...

"Hello? Are you still there?"

Jude nodded, "Yes, I'm here."

Drop the call and walk away!

I'm not...

Just do it.

I can't...

You can do it.

"Jude? Are you still there?"

You can do it.

I can't.

Yes, you can do it. It's the best thing you can do.

No, you don't understand.

"Jude, are you still there?"

Jude swallowed hard, actually swallowing nothing but dry air that caused his throat to hurt as it went down.

What are you trying to involve yourself in, man? What are you trying to do? Who are you even talking with?

I must...

No! You can...

It must be...

“Jude, are you there?”

Jude closed his eyes, “Yes,” he whispered.

Eric cleared his throat and said, “You know if there’s something you want to talk about or something you think I can do for you, I’m all ears.”

Jude nodded and wiped off some water or sweat that was almost entering his left eye.

“We’re friends, remember?”

Jude nodded again as if Eric could see him.

Don’t say anything. You still have a chance.

Jude felt the sweat pouring now, running down in rivers from his armpit.

Don’t open your mouth, you can still...

Why did you call then?

“Jude, I’m listening.”

It’s too late.

No it’s not, don’t...

I’ve to...

You...

I’ve to you don’t understand. I have to do this. This is the only way out for me, the only way I can get out of the dark cloud. And He understands.

“Jude?”

“Yes?”

“What’s the problem?”

That thought came again, that thought that Eric had known all along that he was going to call and had been waiting for the call.

You can still...

He heard Eric clear his throat at the other end.

“I want to ask you for a favor,” Jude said.

“I’m listening.”

He told Eric what he wanted, his voice surprisingly flat as he spoke, his heart and the trembling suddenly going calm. He felt lighter and lighter as he spoke.

He's going to tell me he can't help, Jude thought as he finished.

But Eric cleared his throat and said, "I'll see what I can do, but don't worry yourself, everything's going to be fine."

Chapter Sixty-four

It was past midnight when he arrived. But it was the same hotel and strangely the same hotel room and the same door that he knocked. The rain outside was now a downpour, the heavens finally growing tired of pretending with the drizzling rain and finally showing its true face.

Water was dripping from his wet clothes as he stood at the door. He felt numb, like a piece of wood, a log of wood. And his heart was completely calm in his chest and he even felt like he was somewhere else, as if the person standing at the door was just a fictitious version of him and the true him was not there at that door but somewhere else, somewhere far...

The door opened before him.

And it was the same man at the door, the same perfect looking man with his perfect smile on his face.

"You're wet," the man said and then turned and walked into the room. A few minutes later he came back with a dry clean and perfectly white towel and handed it to Jude, "You can easily catch a cold in this rain."

Jude wiped his face and followed the man inside the hotel room.

The man slowly closed the door.

Chapter Sixty-five

*L*ife is a limbo, and we're already dead and living in this limbo but we don't even know it yet. We don't know that nothing we do can change anything anymore...

"Are you even listening to me?" Niba was saying.

"Hmm?" Jude looked up at him.

"I've been talking," Niba said and shook his head. He knew Niba had been telling him a story; a story which Niba thought was very funny. The only problem was that he had not heard one word of the story as he had sat there. And it was clear that Niba could see it too.

"Are you alright? What's wrong, man?" Niba looked at him and shook his head again, "I don't know, since that day you disappeared you've been," he shook his head again, "I don't know... Are you alright?"

Jude nodded but he could see that he was not fooling Niba, he could see that look in his eyes, that look that said he could see more than was visible, that look that he could no longer hold...

Could Niba see it?

"Are you sure, man?"

Jude nodded again.

Niba shrugged and took a sip of beer as if that was going to stop everything.

It was already a week after that rainy night, that long rainy night that had almost not ended. That long rainy night that had never existed.

Even the hotel room scene?

Yes, even the hotel room scene. All that was behind him now, just history that had never happened, he told himself as he sat in the bar with Niba. It had never happened and so it was going to remain, history that had never happened. And the only way to make sure it remained so was by living his life, living his normal life again. And that was why he was here with Niba after disappearing from the sight of the world for a full week...

"Where've you been, man?" Niba had asked him as he had entered the bar.

"Around."

“Not even answering your calls?”

“I needed sometime alone,” he said and tried a smile that did not come.

And Niba had looked at him with that look that was more than a look, that look that could see more than he wanted.

Could he tell by looking at him?

Niba looked at him again, his eyes making a detailed study and seeing a lot that was there and wasn't there. He shook his head and smiled, “You're not alright, man,” he said.

Did he know? Did he know somehow what had happened? Was it visible on his face?

“Shit, you look like a man who has not been able to sleep for two years. Do you look at the mirror these days, man?” Niba shook his head again and looked at him with some concern, “What's the problem? You haven't even touched your beer.”

Jude looked down at the still untouched beer before him. He had no appetite whatsoever and no real intentions of drinking the beer. All that had brought him into the bar was the idea of trying to act normal, to act like nothing had happened. The idea of holding the neck of the bottle and taking it up to his mouth suddenly brought a very horrible memory, a memory that came with a taste, a taste that he wanted to forget forever.

“You can talk to me, man,” Niba said, “I know there's a problem. You look bad, man, you look really bad.”

And I feel bad.

Did Niba somehow know just looking at him? Know what he had done in that hotel room?

No, it was not possible. But...

“Come on, man, I'm your friend.”

Jude felt something start to stir inside, something that was now directed towards Niba as he sat there talking to him.

“...If there's a problem just let me know,” Niba was saying, he looked at Jude and asked, “She's giving you trouble isn't she? You don't have to keep trying to believe she's anything but a prostitute. A prostitute without any feelings...”

“I'm fine!” Jude almost screamed and Niba would've taken a literal step back if he was standing. A few heads in the bar turned and looked at them.

Jude felt the anger; it was burning now with a red hot flame. He felt like picking up the bottle of beer before him and shattering it on Niba's head, shatter it and pound Niba's head till it was only a bloody mess. Why was Niba saying all what he was saying? Why did Niba keep having that opinion about Mabel? What was wrong with Niba? Why couldn't he see that he did not want to talk about anything?

He took a deep breath, but he could feel himself already shaking.

What did Niba want him to tell him? The story about that hotel room?

Niba raised his two hands in a gesture of surrender and forced a smile, "Okay, if you say so, man, if you say so. I was only trying to be helpful, you know you're my friend and I don't want to see you in any trouble," he shook his head, "Let's just forget it and drink our beer."

Niba reached out to pat him on the shoulder.

Don't touch me! Jude almost shouted trying to shrink away from the touch.

But this is Niba, not some man in a hotel room.

What was wrong with him?

Jude felt a new wave of anger, but this one was not directed at Niba alone.

He had felt numb and had thought he was going to keep feeling numb. His brain had not been working and there had been no feeling in his body. He was inside a shell, a shell that was capable of preventing him from thinking or feeling anything. A shell that had turned him into a mindless zombie as he had walked out of that hotel room in the morning. He had still been that double person he had been during the night, that double person that had been observing everything from an angle in the room, that person that had not taken part in anything.

But arriving at Mabel's place that morning, things had completely changed. He would've been able to understand anger, to understand a long query, a lot of questions and disbelief at the lies he would have told. He had expected a battle, a battle in which he was prepared to lash out and make her feel the pain he had felt, to make her understand what the world was all about. But when he had walked in, she had not even asked him the simplest question of where he had been, instead she had looked at him with her sad eyes and started crying. The hot tears running down her cheeks as she

embraced him, telling him how relieved she was to see him in one piece, “I was afraid,” she had said trying to smile despite the tears running down her cheeks, “I was so afraid and I didn’t sleep. I didn’t know what to do.” She looked at him and tried to laugh, “I called everybody I knew,” and then she had embraced him tightly.

And that single question had popped into his head from nowhere, “What have I done?”

And it was a betrayal, a betrayal that he could not bear to think about. He had betrayed everything he had ever believed in, betrayed her and all she felt for him, betrayed himself. And he could feel the damage that betrayal had done, the damage that no one could see or understand, and it was big. The only thing he knew anybody who had ever known him could see was the fact that he was no longer present, that the person walking around and lying around was somebody else, somebody who just happened to look like him and talk like him. The true him was gone, buried in a dark bottomless pit without any hope of ever coming out of that pit.

He had betrayed her, and all she had ever wanted to do was to make him comfortable. Betrayed her without even a...

“Are you okay?” she had asked him last night (a question that was now as frequent as the day), when he had failed again to get the man in him to response to her needs. It had started that day he had came back from the hotel, that night she had tried to make love to him and he had not been able to respond. He had just laid there unable to look at her as she looked back at him with a lot of frustration in her eyes after trying tirelessly to get the man in him to respond to no avail.

“Yes, I think so,” he had told her unable to look at her.

She was silent for a while and then said, “Is it the pregnancy?”

“No.”

“Then what’s it?”

“I’m just tired.”

He had slowly turned away from her and stared at the wall of the room unable to sleep.

He had betrayed her, and now Niba was here trying to tell him he had a problem because of her, that she was the problem. And when he knew what the problem was. How was that suppose to make him feel?

You need to go.

It was the logical thing to do, because he knew if he continued sitting there he was going to do something bad.

“I need to go,” he said. He no longer wanted anything to do with Niba or anybody in the world. All he wanted now was just disappear, just disappear and be alone where nobody could start asking him questions he could not answer.

“Hey, man if what I said...”

He could see the surprise in Niba’s eyes and he tried a smile that did not come again and shook his head, “No.”

“Look, man, let’s just forget about it and drink.”

“I don’t think I want to drink.”

“Look, man...” Niba placed a hand on his hand as he stood.

Jude looked down at the hand hating the feel of it on his skin. He did not want any man touching him ever again. He slowly shook the hand away and turned away, “I need to go.”

He heard Niba calling his name as he walked out of the bar and out of Niba’s life...

Chapter Sixty-six

He thought about the envelope again that night. The envelope was still lying under the mattress where he had kept it that blessed morning, lying there and catching some dust. The envelop that was his payment!

Or was it? Was that envelope really his payment after that night? Was it what he had sacrificed all he had sacrificed for? And what had he truly sacrificed in that hotel room? He wanted to believe he did not know, but he knew that it was a lie; somehow he knew what he had given up in that hotel room; knew what he had consciously decided to give up. And it was something he did not want to think about. And all that for an envelope, an envelope that was lying now under his mattress and catching dust, and an envelope he could not even bear to look at its content or even touch again.

That was his payment!

Well, not really, the memories too, they're part of the payment.

Yes the memories too. And that was going to be his life, his life till the end of his days, having that constant reminder, having the memories come back in multicolor. The memories could not be wiped out, even if he had thought foolishly that he could do that. The memories were his to keep forever, the real payment of his act that night in the hotel room, a colored movie that was going to keep playing in his head at every second something took him back to that hotel room, which was very often. That multicolored movie that was going to play with all the sounds turned up, the sound of that satisfied moaning in his ears, the sound he wished he could just turn off. But it was impossible to do that, just as it was impossible to stop tasting that horrible taste in his mouth of something he could not think about, or the feel of clammy soft hands on his naked body, hands that had gripped him at all the wrong locations of his body. There was no way he could block the heavy panting at the back of his ears as that forceful rhythmic movement around his buttocks had increased, or that sudden disgraceful act of an erection that belonged to him coming along, or that shuddering behind him that could only mean pleasure and satisfaction as the act came to a close. It was his

multicolored movie to watch, his movie that had all the necessary subtitles, and there was nothing he could do about it.

That was his real payment, not that envelope lying under the mattress and catching some dust. The memories were his real payment.

And when he had thought he had done it for something else..., probably for the envelope and a lot of promises. Jude looked at the ceiling and felt that familiar anger, that anger that was now mixed with a lot of shame and confusion. Why had he done something like that? How had he been able to forget everything and lower himself in that manner?

You wanted a key to your future, padre.

A key he was now lying on, a key that without doubt could open the door to his future faster than could be believed. That key was his now, and could assure a new life for him and Mabel and the baby, and not only a new life, but a life free of uncertainties. And all that stood between him and that future now was the mattress...

Then why don't you do it?

I don't know.

Are you afraid something's going to bite you from inside? You've already done the deed, so what are you afraid of now?

I don't know.

Maybe you think there's still some redemption left for you? You think using the content of that envelope will make you committed? That's funny because you're already committed.

No!

He wanted to believe that, but at the same time he knew it was absurd, just like thinking of what was in the envelope as his payment for that act was absurd (when he knew the payment for that act he had done was something else, something he could not even start to think about). It was absurd because even if he left the envelope there for a thousand years, nothing was going to change, the deed was already done and the book was already written. He knew a more logical thing to do was to open that envelope and start using what was inside (that was why he had done the act in the first place). But he knew he could not do the logical thing anymore, because he was never going to touch that envelope with his hands again and he did not want to know if truly what was inside was what he had been told was inside.

But why?

I don't know.

But he knew and he knew it. There was a reason he could not do that and he knew it, even if the reason was not quite clear to him.

Mabel turned around sleepily in bed placing a hand on his chest. Jude looked at the hand feeling that familiar but strange urge to shrink away from that hand on him. He felt his heart starting to beat faster as he slowly lifted the hand and placed it on the bed away from him.

How long are you going to keep doing this?

Jude closed his eyes, already knowing the face that he was going to see...

That smiling satisfied face that he could not look at. That smiling face with eyes that were smiling, smiling but with something hidden in them, some shadow that was filled with a knowledge he did not want to see for he knew the knowledge could only be darker and deeper than the darkest pit.

"You were good," the man said and ran a hand over Jude's head, "I swear you were good." Jude wanted to shrink from that hand, wanted to disappear and have nothing to do with that cold clammy hand touching him. He hated its soft clammy feel on his skin, hated it with all his heart, "You were good," the man said again and whistled. The man was standing before him, still completely naked and enjoying the power he had over Jude in that room. Jude's hands tightened on his clothes, he was holding them sitting on the bed and looking down at the floor feeling numb and not even knowing if he was ever going to wear the clothes even if he had that strong urge to run out of the room.

"Here," the man said.

Jude did not look up, he knew what he was going to see, that satisfied smiling face with the smiling eyes that were filled with a shadow.

"Are you going to take this or what?" the man asked and laughed a laugh that would have split Jude's heart into two if he was not all numb.

Jude nodded not knowing if it was a voluntary or involuntary act.

"Come on, take it."

Jude looked up finally, only briefly and could see an envelope in the man's hand, a big one. The man had the envelope extended towards him. Jude tried to lift his own hand and take it, but his hand was immobile and refused to obey his orders.

The man laughed softly, “Oh, you’re still tired, I can understand that, God you were good,” the man said and dropped the envelope on the bed beside Jude, “Inside is some cash that you’ll need. And I remembered what you’ve always wanted, so there’s a passport inside, your international passport and a lot more. You can now start seriously...,” the man smiled and rubbed Jude’s cheek with his hand and said, “Everything will happen at its pace. If you need anything, anymore cash, anything at all, you know what to do.”

That thought came again, and this time it was not just a question but a statement; they knew he was going to come begging them. A tiny bit of something started in his heart, but it was snuffed off by the man’s next words, “It’s all yours, you deserve it,” the man laugh his soft irritating laughter and said, “And don’t forget it, you were good.”

Jude took a deep breath suddenly seeing a color, a color the man standing before him still naked his man hood dangling freely between his legs, could not see.

“Hey, I know how you feel, but don’t worry everything will be fine, you’ll get used to this in no time at all,” the man laughed, and then stifled a yawn and told him, “Guess I’m tired too, you completely wear me down. I’ll take a shower, why don’t you join me, we can still do some crazy things in the shower...”

Jude slowly opened his eyes, he could see that color again, and it was getting deeper and deeper...

Chapter Sixty-seven

You'll get used to it in no time at all.

Get used to what? The constant multicolored movie that was playing in his head? The fact that that was his real payment for sacrificing his soul to something he could not even start to comprehend?

No!

That was a lie, a lie that he had even started believing as he had come to his conclusion, a lie that the world had wanted him to believe in, that God Himself had wanted him to believe in. But it was over now, that lie.

At some point during the night, the churning in his brain started to take a shape. He was lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling and suddenly that shape was there before him, that picture that was terrific to look at. And suddenly he felt the anger and the shame disappear as he stared at that picture that had the color that was now too deep.

It was terrific!

He felt suddenly good, good and light in the head, more than he had ever felt in his whole life.

It was terrific!

Jude actually felt his lips form a smile in the semi-darkness of the room; it was a completely beautiful smile. It felt like his very first smile since God had brought him into this world.

What's the matter?

Jude shrugged and felt that smile expanding.

Hey, what's the matter with you? Why are you smiling?

I don't have any idea.

He felt the smile turn into something else and he started to laugh, waking Mabel in the process.

"What's it?" she murmured in her sleepy voice.

"Nothing," but he did not stop laughing and tried covering his mouth, but the laughter kept spilling out.

"Are you okay?" she was getting concerned now.

"Sorry, I'm fine."

And he could not stop laughing. He had never enjoyed any laughter that much.

Chapter Sixty-eight

Such a day was not supposed to be bright. It was supposed to be a day with heavy ceilings of dark clouds and huge sketches of lightening tearing through the sky like a picture of the apocalypse. But it was a bright day, a rare occasion in Bamenda at that time of the year. September was always a time of the year cursed with dark rainy clouds and rainy days, the rain trying to do its last show before leaving the stage for the dry winds and the sun.

But that day was a bright one, a rare bright one with a bright cloudless sky and the people below it opening their hearts to that rare warmth and brightness. And there was no one among that multitude that had a heart more open to that warmth and brightness like Jude. His heart was already sparkling when he woke up that morning with a huge smile still on his face.

It was around four in the evening that day when Mabel decided to leave the room. She told him she was going to pay a friend a visit though he did not hear any of that. He was sitting on the bed, his face still lit by that new warmth inside his heart.

"I'm going out," she said again looking at him with that look (a look he had not been able to notice) she had had all day, that look of confusion and wonder.

"Okay," Jude said in a jovial voice.

She stood for a while looking at him, a lot of questions he could not answer clouding her face. He smiled up at her.

"You've been in here all day," she said, "Why don't you go out? You can check on your friend, Niba."

She could sense something, but she could not know exactly what that something was.

"No, I'm okay here."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," he smiled at her again and said, "Do I look like I'm not sure?"

She turned to leave the room but stopped and turned back to him and said, "You know I love you."

Jude nodded, "I know."

She smiled her own sad smile, took his hand and squeezed it and then left the room.

He waited for about thirty minutes, just sitting there on the bed, and then he got up. There was work to be done and he knew exactly how to do it.

He found the envelope where he had kept it that morning under the mattress. Carefully, he opened the envelope and spilled its content on the floor. The money on the floor would've been a sight two days ago, but he did not even see it or even the international passport sticking out of that pile of money.

He found the kerosene container where it was supposed to be, near the kerosene stove Mabel had been using all her miserable life. There was still some kerosene in the container and he poured a good quantity on the pile on the floor. He found the match box, selected a match stick and lit it up. It caught with a silent whoop.

It was beautiful!

He stood and watched as it burnt to ash, a fascinated smile on his face. When it was all ash, his fake payment, he swept it from the floor.

It was time to do the second act of the day.

He made the call and actually laughed when the man said something that was supposed to sound funny.

Chapter Sixty-nine

The first taxi he flagged had its door opened for him before he could even give his destination. It was all perfect, he told himself feeling that cold steel inside his jacket pocket.

“Drive as fast as you can,” he told the driver.

“Are you hiring me?” the driver asked already en route to start a quarrel but when he saw Jude’s smile the idea evaporated from his head faster than it had entered.

“No, I’m not hiring you,” Jude said.

The receptionist at the hotel lobby tried to smile at him, but her smile was caught on her lips when he flashed her his own smile. She hurriedly looked away.

It was the same hotel room and the same door that he knocked a few minutes later. He felt his jacket pocket again before the door was opened.

He smiled at the man standing at the door before him.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you this soon,” the man who called himself Bruno, said.

“I wasn’t expecting it myself.”

The man laughed softly, “You weren’t even thinking you’ll ever call me again,” he said and gave way for Jude to enter the room, “I told you, you’ll be used to it in no time.”

Jude felt his hand touch the handle of that cold steel in his jacket pocket.

The man closed the door and turned away from it, “You want a drink?” he was already walking to get one.

“No.”

“Oh, you just want to go on and do things,” the man said and laughed, “I love that too.”

Jude felt his right hand tightened on the handle of the steel in his pocket. It was time, time to wipe that smile from the man’s face forever, Jude thought as the man was turning to look at him. He took out his hand holding that cold steel and felt his heart go completely quiet.

The man was still smiling, and then he saw the kitchen knife and a tiny bit of confusion appeared on his perfect face.

The first blow caught the man squarely in the throat.

Epilogue

It was all over TV the next day, both local and national; a horrible scene that was beyond anybody's idea of horror. In every TV screen, the journalist reporting the incident warned the viewers about the nature of the pictures. Yet thousands were glued to their TV screens, watching and re-watching and wondering how something like that had happened.

Mabel did not see it because she had no TV set in her damp murky room. She only heard about it after spending another night all worried and praying nothing bad had happened. And naturally, she collapsed in disbelief, sobbing and wishing it was all a nightmare that was going to end soon. And before long, she believed it had all been a nightmare.

Niba saw it and held his mouth open the rest of the day. He was sitting in a bar and thinking about how queer and completely difficult to deal with Jude had become when the news came up on the small TV screen in the bar. He sat looking at the pictures and listening to the journalist talk and telling himself over and over again that the man they were talking about was not the Jude he knew, because he knew that Jude could not do something like that.

Derrick saw it sitting with *the dragon lady* in their living room. He could not understand any of what they were saying in the screen as he sat there looking at the faces on the screen for his brain could not comprehend what was being said. But he started to comprehend when *the dragon lady* made a comment that he did not hear but a comment he knew was sarcastic. He took initiative in their marriage for the first time and slapped her with a force that sent her to the floor where she sat completely stunned throughout the report, a hand gingerly touching that spot on her cheek that was becoming a visible mark of a human hand. When the report was over, Derrick walked into his room and sat there looking at nothing in particular. He sat that way for a long while, then the tears started to fall...

But none of them, just like the thousands of viewers saw the scene as it was. Yes, they saw brief scenes but not the real thing. The person who saw the real picture (a picture that was going to haunt him all his life), was a young police constable, the first person who had entered the hotel room. But of all the blood and the gore in the room, what will haunt him more will be

the smile on Jude's bloody face as he had sat with his back on the wall, the body that had been stabbed more times than could be counted lying before him, and the knife in his hand. The young constable will always remember that face and the humming the bloody man had been humming as he handed him the kitchen knife clogged with human flesh and blood without any resistance.

Throughout the coming days, a lot of people would wonder how such a thing had happened. A lot of confused debates would take place always ending in more confusion. A lot of whispers about what everybody was completely avoiding to call by name...

And from time to time, when some of the darkness would clear from his mind, Jude himself would find himself wondering how something like that had happened...

The End

In Cameroon life isn't only like living in limbo, it is like living in the very centre of a hellish junkyard where dreams are dumped and wishes shattered at will by forces which can barely be controlled or understood. It is in this junkyard of dreams that Jude Maimo finds himself after years of studies and obtaining a university degree that could not even procure him a decent job. Reluctantly living under his brother's care after having failed grossly in an attempt to be independent, and doing a job that is more than an insult to him, he still hopes to one day live his simple dream; furthering his education long enough to have a respectable and decent job that could make him truly independent. Entangled in a relationship he can barely understand and weighed down by the daily temptations of natural life, a long lost friend from back in his school days suddenly appears as a light to lead him to the end of the tunnel. But a little too late, he discovers that the promised light of salvation is just another face of darkness, a darkness that wants more than his soul, a darkness that can only lead to tragedy....

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